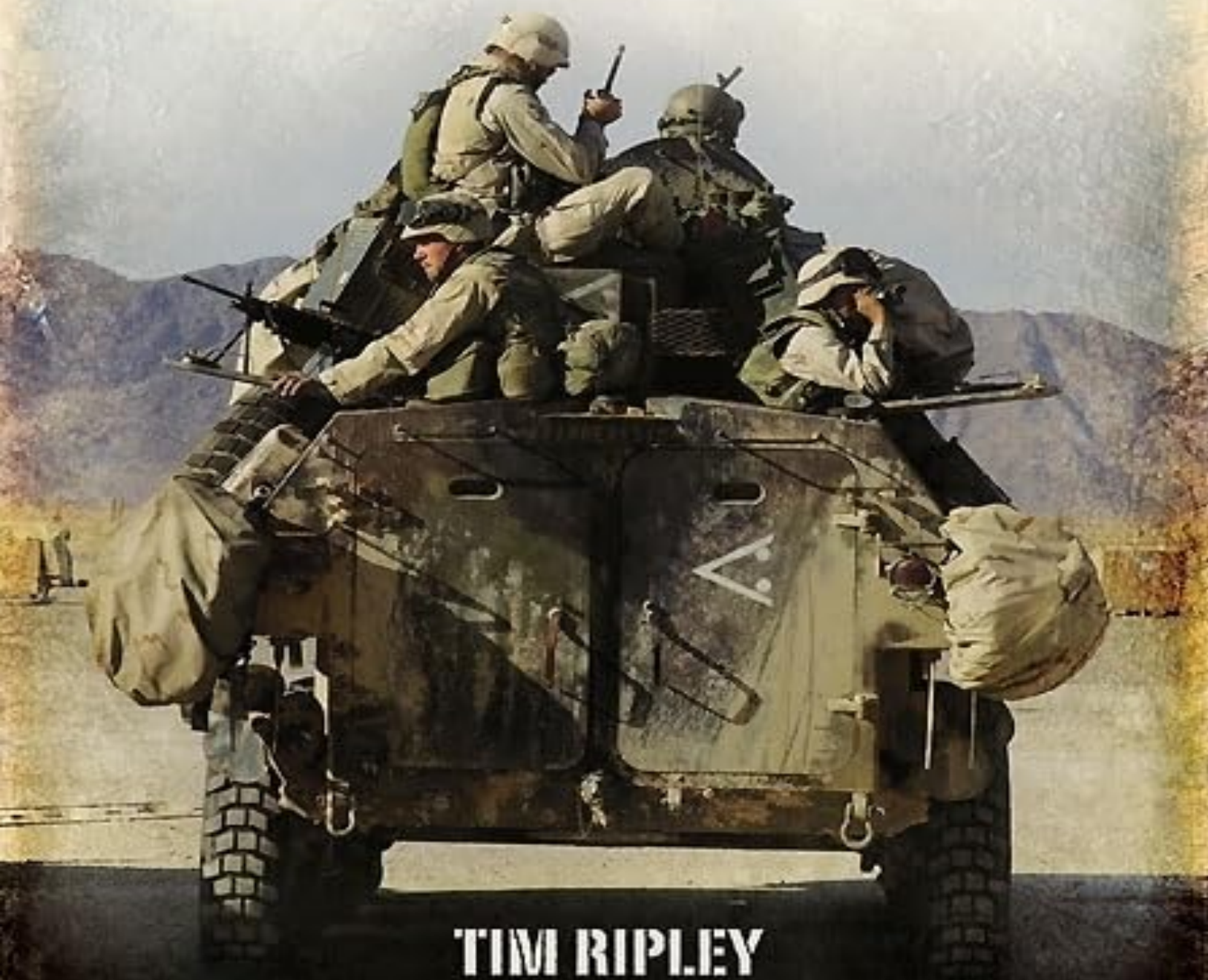




OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

THE SEEDS OF WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

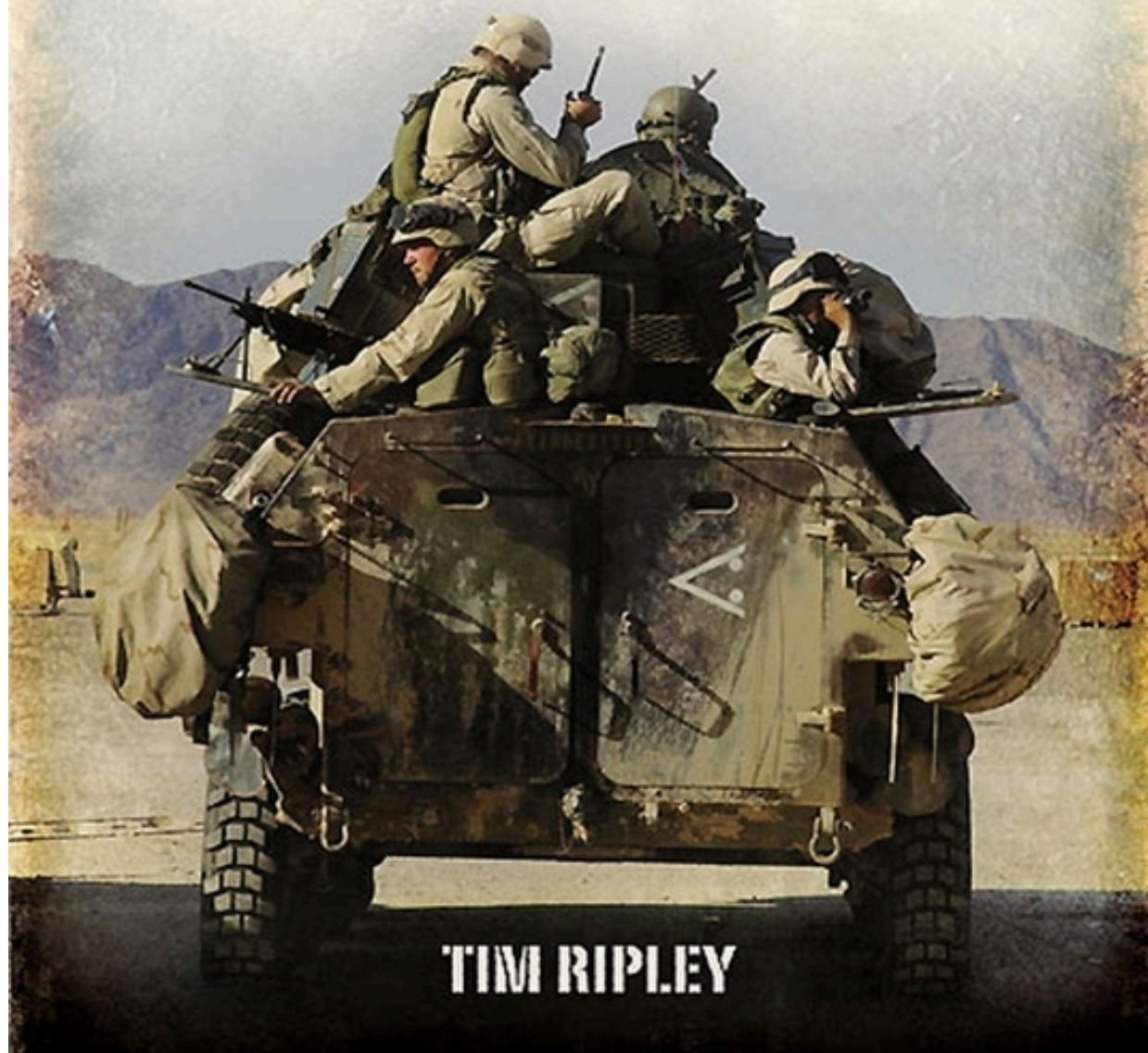


TIM RIPLEY



OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

THE SEEDS OF WAR IN AFGHANISTAN



OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

America's Afghan War 2001 to 2002

Tim Ripley



Pen & Sword
AVIATION

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Pen & Sword Aviation
an imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

Copyright © Tim Ripley, 2011
9781844686056

The right of Tim Ripley to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the Publisher in writing.

Typeset in 11/13pt Palatino by
Concept, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire

Printed and bound by
Printworks International

Pen & Sword Books Ltd incorporates the Imprints of Pen & Sword Aviation, Pen & Sword Family History, Pen & Sword Maritime, Pen & Sword Military, Pen & Sword Discovery, Wharncliffe Local History, Wharncliffe True Crime, Wharncliffe Transport, Pen & Sword Select, Pen &

Sword Military Classics, Leo Cooper, The Praetorian Press, Remember When, Seaforth Publishing and Frontline Publishing.

For a complete list of Pen & Sword titles please contact

PEN & SWORD BOOKS LIMITED

47 Church Street, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, S70 2AS, England

E-mail: enquiries@pen-and-sword.co.uk

Website: www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Chapter 1 - Operation Enduring Freedom – Ten Years On](#)

[Chapter 2 - Experience of War](#)

[Chapter 3 - The Commanders](#)

[Chapter 4 - ‘They Will Hear from Us’](#)

[Chapter 5 - On the Brink of War](#)

[Chapter 6 - Strategic Air Campaign](#)

[Chapter 7 - Northern Alliance Attacks](#)

[Chapter 8 - Air War](#)

[Chapter 9 - Revolt in the South](#)

[Chapter 10 - Spy Planes and Drones](#)

[Chapter 11 - Battle of Tora Bora](#)

[Chapter 12 - ISAF Deploys](#)

[Chapter 13 - Light Footprint](#)

[Chapter 14 - A Flawed Victory?](#)

[Sources](#)

[Glossary of Terms](#)

[Index](#)

Chapter 1

Operation Enduring Freedom – Ten Years On

The date 11 September 2011 will mark the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the start of the subsequent American-led military operation in Afghanistan against the bases of Usama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization, which was immediately accused of being responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon that left just under 3,000 dead. (Usama bin Laden is the usual translation from Arabic, although the spelling Osama bin Laden is commonly used in the media. US and British troops and 'spooks' in Afghanistan called him Usama bin Laden, shortening it to UBL, so that is the spelling that has been used here.)

The sun streams through the dust cloud over the ruins of the World Trade Centre.

(Andrea Booher/ FEMA)



'Ground Zero' at the World Trade Centre on 19 September 2001, New York City.

(US Navy/ Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Aaron Peterson)

At first it appeared that more than 10,000 people had died in the attacks but as the dust settled the authorities in the US were able to confirm the death toll as 2,996, including the 19 hijackers of the four aircraft that were used as weapons and 2,977 victims. Some 246 victims were on the hijacked aircraft. The majority of the dead were in New York City where 2,606 died in the towers and on the ground, and a further 125 died at the Pentagon. All the deaths in the attacks were civilians, except for 55 military personnel killed in the attack on the Pentagon.

The US intervention in Afghanistan at first appeared to inflict a decisive defeat on the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, and the Taliban regime that protected them. But a decade on, coalition forces, including more than 100,000 US troops, were still fighting in the Central Asian country, raising fears that they might be bogged down in a 'Vietnam War-style quagmire'.

This book tells the story of the first six months of the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan, which saw strong air and special forces unseat the Taliban regime, the launching of search and destroy operations to hunt down bin Laden and the setting up of President Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul. These events were the catalyst for the subsequent war in Afghanistan, which was still on-going ten years after 9/11.

While many of the events of this period are well known, many of the reasons why they happened have not been well understood. The opening months of the war in Afghanistan were incredibly confused. Few journalists had access to the main events of the period and as a result many urban myths emerged about what actually happened in the war. This book will provide the inside story of many of these events and for the first time pull them together in a coherent and understandable narrative.

In the decade since the initial US invasion, almost all the major figures on the US and British side, US President George Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, US Central Command chief General Tommy Franks and Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet, have produced accounts of their

role in the campaign and many lower ranking military and intelligence personnel have also provided accounts of their experiences.

Fires still burning amidst the rubble of the World Trade Centre on 13 September, two days after the attack on the Twin Towers. (US Navy Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Jim Watson)





Smoke bellows from the Pentagon after a hijacked airliner crashed into the building on 11 September 2001. (USAF/TSgt Jim Varhegyi)

I have also been able to speak to many participants in the conflict, as well as acquire a large quantity of official military documents, including after action reports and lessons learnt studies for this phase of the Afghan campaign. Over the past decade, I have also visited Afghanistan on a number of occasions and visited several of the key locations in the battles of 2001.

When drawing together all this information the picture that emerges is very different in many respects to that portrayed at the time by politicians and generals keen to be seen in the rosy glow of victory. In particular, in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion the role of key individuals from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in devising and executing the American war plan was little known. More recently, a spate of memoirs from American intelligence operatives and special forces troops who were on the ground in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002, as well as the release of previously classified military documents from the period, have made it possible to build up a very comprehensive picture of battles in Afghanistan at this time.



A HH-60G Pave Hawk rescue helicopter, from the 66th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, takes on fuel from a HC-130 Combat Shadow during a mission over Afghanistan in the spring of 2002. (USAF/ TSgt Mike Buytas)

Predator unmanned aerial vehicles played a central role in the US campaign in Afghanistan, using Hellfire missiles to strike at high value targets. (USAF)



At the heart of this book has been the construction of a complete narrative of events and then making linkages to provide a real insight into when key decisions were made and who made them. This is not always obvious and at the time a great deal of effort was put into creating confusion about US and Coalition decision making. I hope this book goes some way to lifting that veil of secrecy and confusion.

It is clear from analysis of the battles of late 2001 and early 2002 that the outcome of the fighting was very different from that envisaged by senior US political and military leaders before the first bombs were dropped on 7 October 2001. Events on the battlefield ran out of control on a number of occasions, with the Afghans and other local players dictating the course of events for their own ends. Mistakes were made in the planning and execution of the US-led campaign because key decision makers were not fully informed of events on the ground or just had no understanding of the nature of the conflict the US and its allies found themselves engaged in.

A US Navy SEAL commando observes abandoned munitions being destroyed, 12 February 2002. The munitions were discovered during a Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) mission of a suspected Al Qaeda base in Eastern Afghanistan. (US Navy/ Photographer's Mate 1st Class Tim Turner)





Tim Ripley at Kandahar Airfield. (Tim Ripley)

The consequences of the opening months of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 are still being felt. Hopefully, this book will shed some light on the reality of intervening in Afghanistan and the countries that border it so that in the future the same mistakes will not be made again.

Chapter 2

Experience of War

War in Afghanistan in 2001 and early 2002 was a small-scale affair. Contrary to much of the media reporting of the conflict, the fighting in the Central Asian country was limited to several very small regions and large parts of the country were untouched by the combat between US forces and their opponents.

The size of the forces involved in these battles were also very small, with fewer than 50,000 fighters being involved at the height of the fighting in October and November 2001, but only a few thousand men were engaged, on both sides, in the main battles of this period. At this point fewer than 1,000 US personnel were on the ground in Afghanistan and very few of them were ever involved in close quarter combat.

From the Afghan point of view, the US-led invasion was just another round of conflicts that had been going on almost continuously for more than two decades. Afghanistan has been blighted by conflict since the late 1970s. The Central Asian country has suffered from at least two foreign invasions, numerous covert interventions and almost incessant civil war since 1979.

Armies in Afghanistan in 2001 lacked most of the features that westerners would recognize. The country came bottom of most global league tables of health, life expectancy and industrial production, and topped global poverty and infantry mortality league tables. It had long been regarded as one of the poorest countries in the world and this meant the capacity of its military forces was limited.

Afghan military forces, of all tribal, political and religious persuasions, had few sophisticated weapons systems or combat aircraft. The most

complex weapons in Afghan arsenals were old Soviet-era Mil Mi-17 transport helicopters, T-55 main battle tanks and 122-mm artillery pieces. The Taliban alone had a handful of 1970s-vintage MiG-21 jet fighters, which they occasionally sent up to try to intercept Northern Alliance helicopters bringing in supplies from Tajikistan or Uzbekistan.



A pro-US Afghan fighter wraps a bandolier of ammunition around his body during a mission to help secure a compound that is being searched by US Marines of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) in Afghanistan's Helmand Province in January 2002. (US Navy/Chief Photographer's Mate Johnny Bivera)



A view of downtown Kandahar City from the roof of the governor's palace on 20 April 2002. (USAF/SSgt Ricky A. Bloom)

However, the country had been touched by the modern communications revolution and any self-respecting Afghan politician, warlord, tribal chief or leader of a smuggling gang had his own satellite phone and access to the internet.

Afghan armies were recruited and organized on tribal lines, with contingents of soldiers being offered up for service to political or military leaders by local tribal chiefs. Each district would offer several hundred soldiers to the provincial chief to defend their locale or to participate in offensive battles.

The average age of these soldiers was usually between fifteen and seventeen and very few had any formal military training. While every young Afghan from the countryside had learnt to shoot by this age, they had little training in how to work and fight together as a military unit. What training they received, took place on the front lines during fighting. The ones that survived their brutal baptism of fire graduated to operating mortars, artillery pieces or tanks.

Combat in Afghanistan at the end of the twentieth century bore many similarities with First World War trench warfare. Soldiers spent weeks and months at a time manning trench lines around the main cities or key mountain ranges. Food and clean water, as well as shelter and fuel to warm bunkers, was in short supply. Discipline was often brutal with senior officers being desperate to prevent desertions depleting their front-line fighting strength.

Afghan soldiers loyal to the leader of anti-Taliban forces in the western city of Herat, Ismail Khan, show off their newly supplied US BDU camouflage uniforms in the spring of 2002. (US DoD)



The iconic AK-47 assault rifle was the primary weapon of all armed groups in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002. The majority came from Soviet, Chinese, Pakistani and Indian sources, but some were even manufactured in local workshops around Afghanistan. (US Army/Spc. Eric E. Hughes)

Often, little happened on these front lines for several weeks or months at a time as the rival armies tried to conserve scarce ammunition and fuel for major offensives. The opposing units were often recruited from the same or neighbouring communities so it was common for communications across the front lines to take place, to trade food and other items to try to improve their miserable lot. It was not unusual for rival soldiers to pass through their nominal enemy's lines to return home on leave for religious festivals or to harvest crops.

This lack of animosity against their opponents was also common at higher levels in Afghan political and military circles. Most of Afghanistan's politicians and warlords had, at several points since the Soviets withdrew in 1989, been allied with each other. As long as their tribal, political and economic interests were not threatened, Afghan leaders were happy to deal with their opponents. This meant that few would press home their military offensives to achieve decisive victory. The lack of resources meant few Afghan armies had the ammunition and fuel to fight for more than a few months in a year. It was more important to keep their meagre armies in existence to protect their home regions, than risk them on offensive operations far from home.

The senior leadership of the Taliban movement that ruled much of Afghanistan from 1996 onwards approached military operations in very different ways. The original Taliban in the early 1990s were students at religious schools in Kandahar, the largest city in southern Afghanistan, and they formed fighting bands or local militia to drive out gangs of criminals who were preying on the population after the collapse of the central government in Kabul.

US Army Special Forces troops load up pack animals to carry equipment as they work with members of the Northern Alliance outside Mazar-e-Sharif on 12 November 2001. (DoD)



The core of the Taliban military was its bands of ultra-loyal fighters. Most had been indoctrinated in madrasas around the movement's spiritual home in Kandahar or refugee camps in Pakistan. These fighting bands were highly mobile in heavily armed pick-up trucks or sports utility vehicles (SUVs). Each band was often supported by a handful of tanks and artillery pieces so they could mount rapid assault operations. Often, they had man-portable surface-to-air missiles or Manpads to provide low-level air defence. In Afghanistan's wars during the 1990s, the Taliban proved a powerful military force because they were able to rapidly move their troops around the country to strike decisively at their enemies. Their biggest advantage was the morale and determination of their fighters, whereas their opponents who would only fight with vigour on their home territory. The Taliban also gained a reputation for not abiding by the 'Afghan rules of war', killing rather than ransoming prisoners and pressing home attacks when their opponents had started to withdraw.

US Army Special Forces troops on patrol in Afghanistan during 2002. (US Army Sgt 1st Class Fred Gurwell)





A US Navy SEAL commando provides cover for his teammates advancing on a suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban position on 14 January 2002. (US Navy/Photographer's Mate 1st Class (AW) Tim Turner)

While the Taliban were able to take Kabul in 1996 and set up the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which soon became notorious for its hardline interpretation of Islam, including banning women from working, girls from going to school and men from shaving, they lacked the power and resources to totally finish off their Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara opponents, who continued to defend their heartlands in the centre and north of the country. From 1996 onwards, the Taliban waged annual summer campaigns to try to chip away at the territory held by the so-called Northern Alliance. Before 2001 it had been dubbed the United Front. Battles revolved around seizing key mountain ranges to bring enemy towns and cities within artillery range. When this happened, rather than hang around to be shelled, the Northern Alliance would pull its troops back to a better defensive position. To fight these campaigns, the Taliban had to resort to the same recruiting methods as their

opponents. So although their forces boasted more than 50,000 men under arms in the summer of 2001, more than two-thirds of them were probably tribal fighters of uncertain quality and loyalty. This diluted the morale and fighting spirit of Taliban armies considerably.



A tired GI from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) takes a knee and watches for enemy movement during a pause in a road march during Operation Anaconda in March 2002. (US Army/Spc. David Marck Jr)

By the summer of 2001, even the hardcore Taliban foot soldiers were getting war-weary after more than five years of continuous fighting. Life in the trenches on the Shomali Plain north of Kabul or around Mazar-e-Sharif was brutal and unforgiving. As a result, many of the best Taliban units were withdrawn from the front to be rested ahead of an expected autumn offensive and the front-line fighting was left to tribal militia units.

If the fighting spirit of the Taliban army was waning in 2001, the presence in Afghanistan of some 5,000 foreign fighters loyal to Usama bin Laden did go some way to compensate for the loss of Afghan-recruited soldiers. The Al Qaeda leaders had returned to Afghanistan in 1996 after being expelled from Sudan (after the Saudis put pressure on the Khartoum government to evict Usama bin Laden) and subsequently set up a network of training camps for Islamic fundamentalists from around the world. Afghanistan became the focus of what was soon known as 'jihadi tourism', as an estimated 20,000 young men travelled to live and train in the Al Qaeda camps in the five years leading up to 2001.

These men wanted to experience living in a 'pure' Islamic environment, untainted by western influences and the modern world. They mixed with Al Qaeda-hardened fighters, developing weapons and bomb-making skills, attending indoctrination classes and in some cases marrying Afghan women. Many of these men returned to their home countries to form the cadre of Islamic underground or terrorist groups that subsequently launched resistance to the US and regimes allied to it. Many others just put the experience behind them.

Bin Laden gathered a hardcore of some 5,000 fighters around him who formed his bodyguard and the main Al Qaeda combat unit, the 055 Brigade. These men were either Arab veterans of the war against the Soviets in the 1980s, or exiles from Egypt, Chechnya and Uzbekistan. They were hardened fighters and were well-equipped with sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, heavy machine guns and light artillery. The Toyota Land Cruiser and pick-up were their favourite modes of transport.

Hardcore Al Qaeda veterans led 055 Brigade but its rank and file were international volunteers who were rotated into the unit after spending several weeks in a training camp around Kabul. They even included European, Australian and Northern American converts to Islam, who had travelled to Afghanistan to get the full jihadi experience. In the summer of 2001, some 2,000 troops of 055 Brigade had been deployed to northern Afghanistan to stiffen the ranks of the Taliban forces in the region. This was far from the Taliban and Pashtun heartland so it was difficult to recruit and motivate foot soldiers to hold the line in the region.



*An SH-60B Seahawk Helicopter prepares to land aboard USS Abraham Lincoln while an F-14D Tomcat awaits its next mission on 14 October 2001.
(US Navy/ Photographer's Mate Airman (PJ) Philip A. McDaniel)*

In the weeks after the 9/11 attacks, US and UK forces began to arrive in Afghanistan to take the fight to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. These men – there were almost no female US and UK soldiers during the first two months of

the war – were professional soldiers or intelligence operatives with many years of operational experience behind them in the 1991 Gulf war, Somalia in 1993 and 1994, the Balkan wars and other conflict zones. Although they were all highly trained and well equipped for their missions, fighting in Afghanistan would be like nothing they had previously experienced.

In the first weeks of the war, small US special forces and intelligence teams of between six and twelve men found themselves deep in Afghanistan, operating alongside tribal militia of the Northern Alliance. These teams often had only one or two linguists who could communicate with their local allies and this meant building trust with them was a slow process.

Although US forces operatives are often portrayed as ‘super soldiers’ with ‘superior fighting skills’, in Afghanistan between October and December 2001 these soldiers rarely fired their personal weapons at the enemy. Their main weapons were laser range finders, global positioning systems (GPS) and radios that allowed them to guide air strikes with pin-point accuracy.

US special forces teams worked hand-in-glove with operatives of the CIA to forge the Northern Alliance, and later groups in eastern and southern Afghanistan. The CIA operatives concentrated on building relationships with senior political and military leaders, while the military pushed forward to the front to direct air strikes on the Taliban positions.

Life for these teams was harsh. They had few creature comforts and very precarious supply lines. They set up primitive bases camps in commandeered building just behind the front and lived off local food in bases with no sanitation. Every member of the small teams had to take turns standing guard, manning observations posts or communications equipment.

The only way to get supplies was either by night-time helicopter shuttles from forward US support bases in Uzbekistan or Pakistan, or parachute supply drops by low-flying USAF Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon transport aircraft.

While physically isolated, the US detachments deep in Afghanistan were connected in real time by broadband internet links running across satellite radios. In their remote operating bases, the special forces and CIA teams could access on-line data bases, libraries of satellite reconnaissance imagery or view live video imagery from General Atomics RQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicles or drones.

This internet connectivity was a key advantage to US troops in the Afghan war and meant that they could choreograph air strikes at a very high tempo. Each special forces' team had a target system, combining high magnification optics, night-vision goggles, laser range finders and GPS devices, which enabled them to record with pin-point accuracy the positions of Taliban troops. These could then be emailed to a US air co-ordination centre in Uzbekistan before being forwarded to strike aircraft orbiting over Afghanistan.

Another decisive element of the US campaign in Afghanistan was the fleet of helicopters that could fly at night across the country's mountainous terrain. Afghanistan has a well-deserved reputation for being one of the world's most demanding environments in which to fly helicopters. A combination of hot temperatures, height above sea level and desert dust means pilots could take little for granted. The country's high mountain ranges and vast deserts offer very different challenges to aviators.

A highly-experienced US Air Force helicopter pilot who flew in southern Afghanistan during this period rated the country's environment as a far more dangerous threat than the enemy. 'The enemy are number eight on my list of threats,' said the pilot. 'The biggest threat is Afghanistan itself – the altitude, heat, darkness, brown out and weather.'



A USAF loadmaster signals a HH-60G Pavehawk to take on fuel from a HC-130P Combat Shadow, during an air-refuelling mission over Afghanistan in early 2002. (USAF/ SSgt William Greer)

The centre of Afghanistan is dominated by a series of mountain ranges that rise to more than 10,000 feet above sea level, which makes it very difficult for even the most powerful aircraft and helicopter to operate over. In such conditions pilots have to carefully judge their speed to ensure they have power to rise above dangerous terrain. It also greatly limited the cargo that could be carried. The ranges that US helicopters had to operate at meant that air-to-air refuelling was essential to get deep into the heart of Afghanistan with enough fuel to return safely to base. Night-time refuelling from a KC-130 Hercules tanker is very difficult in the best of conditions but was made even more demanding by Afghanistan's terrible winter weather that buffeted helicopters and reduced visibility. The helicopter pilots had to 'plug' their machine's refuelling probe into a KC-130's fuel drogue, which was trailed out behind the tanker. This drogue was less than a metre across and Afghanistan's bad weather meant the tanker was buffeted badly, making the drogue flip around violently.

Down in the desert of Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south, the fine dust that is thrown up by a landing helicopter's rotor blades can blind pilots just as they are about to touch down, causing a dangerous loss of situational awareness and causing even the most experienced pilots to accidentally fly into the ground. Known as 'brown outs', these conditions mean helicopter pilots have to carefully judge their final approaches to landing zones. The risks involved are greatly complicated if the enemy open fire and prompt helicopter pilots to take rapid evasive action.

Afghanistan's darkness was also a major threat to nocturnal air operations because of the lack of ambient light from towns or street lighting. This seriously degrades the performance of the night vision goggles used by many pilots in Afghanistan to fly at night by making it difficult to spot the ground.

High above Afghanistan, US Navy fighters provided round-the-clock combat air patrols over US special forces' detachments, ready to drop bombs on targets identified by the troops on the ground. The pilots of the Grumman F-14 Tomcats and McDonnell Douglas F/A-18C Hornets that provided the bulk of fighter support for the Afghan campaign before they headed inland on combat missions had first to be catapulted off US Navy aircraft carriers. This in itself is one of the most demanding flight skills and is only equalled by the task of landing back on an aircraft carrier.

Combat missions over Afghanistan from US Navy carriers routinely lasted around five hours and in some cases, when missions had to be flown to the north of the country, they could take up to ten hours. Multiple air-to-air refuelling, often at night, was the norm to keep the US Navy jets topped up.

Once on station over Afghan battlefields, US Navy pilots had to establish contact with special forces forward air controllers by radio and get updated on targets to be attacked. The pilot then had to try and find the targets using either old-fashioned binoculars or night vision targeting pods. Their thermal imaging systems were able to spot hot vehicles, buildings or people and then they would automatically pass targeting co-ordinates to the aircraft's precision-guided weapons. Even though the pilots often already had the co-ordinates of Taliban positions, they still needed to make a visual identification of the target to satisfy tight rules of engagement to ensure no civilians were at risk.

Doing this while flying a jet at several hundred miles an hour was no easy skill and required the ability to understand the state of play on the ground to ensure they did not drop their bombs on the wrong target, at the wrong time.

The Afghan campaign also featured the widespread use of heavy USAF bombers – Boeing B-52H Stratofortress and Rockwell B-1B Lancers – to strike at front-line Taliban positions. They often only dropped one precision-guided bomb at a time on the instructions of ground controllers.

Afghanistan's remote location meant that the bombers were the only few US aircraft that could remain on patrol over the country for several hours at a time without refuelling. This meant they could circle over the Afghan battlefield and the crews could really get to know what was happening on the ground by speaking to special forces teams over radios. The giant bombers were clearly visible from the ground and their invulnerability made their presence highly intimidating to the Taliban. In contrast, the spirits of Northern Alliance fighters soared when they saw the bombers, which could carry up to thirty tons of bombs at time, overhead.

The crew of a HH-60H Rescue Hawk of Helicopter Antisubmarine, Squadron 6, practises 'brown out' landing procedures in Pakistan in November 2001 prior to the mission to land US Marines at Objective Rhino in southern Afghanistan. (USAF TSgt Scott Reed)



The crews of these bombers got a grandstand view of the fighting unfolding before them on the ground but as the winter weather moved in they often dropped GPS bombs from above cloud. This resulted in their only contact with the war being brief radio conversations with ground controllers.

Even more removed from the battlefields were American military headquarters in countries surrounding Afghanistan. The special forces teams with the Northern Alliance were controlled from Uzbekistan and Qatar, US air operations were run from Saudi Arabia and elite special forces strike teams were based in Oman and Pakistan. These headquarters in turn reported to US Central Command (CENTCOM) in Tampa, Florida. The senior officers at these headquarters exchanged megabytes of information by email, talked incessantly on the telephone and spent interminable hours in video telephone conferences (VTC) with each other.

Many participants in the war at this time commented that huge amounts of effort were being expended by senior officers to very little effect. Only one US three star officer, the US Navy rear admiral in charge of CENTCOM's special forces, visited Northern Alliance-held territory before the fall of Kabul in October and earlier to get a first-hand view of the situation. This led to the feeling that many of the senior US officers involved in running the

campaign thought they knew what was going on in Afghanistan but in reality very few did. Even though US forces possessed some of the most advanced intelligence gathering and communications systems in history of warfare they generated little in the way of 'ground truth' until US personnel had 'boots on the ground' in Afghanistan for several weeks.

Chapter 3

The Commanders

The opposing forces in Afghanistan were led by very different commanders and their differing personalities and command styles were reflected in the way the war was fought.

Taliban and Al Qaeda Leadership

In the summer of 2001 Afghanistan's Taliban regime appeared stronger than ever. Its opponents had been driven from just over 80 per cent of the country and every major population centre was under the Taliban's control. The regime had enacted a series of draconian decrees to try to bend the country to its unbending view of Islam. The most dramatic evidence of the Taliban's arrogance was the demolition of the 1,800-year-old Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001, which attracted worldwide condemnation.

The Taliban leadership in 2001 did not run Afghanistan from Kabul but its main governing organ, its Supreme Shura or council, remained in Kandahar, the organization's spiritual home. The famous one-eyed Mullah Omar was the Taliban nominal head of the Supreme Shura, which took all major decisions collectively. It included senior ministers and leaders who were responsible for specific areas, including defence, foreign affairs, finance, information, interior and justice. The military chief of staff, Mullah Mohammad Hassa Akhund, and head of the army corps, Mullah Mohammad Fazil Akhund, were both members of the Supreme Shura.

The Supreme Shura was separate from the government ministries, which remained in the traditional capital Kabul. These ministries were leftovers from the old Communist era but the ministers in charge of them had little

power or authority unless they could get approval from the Supreme Shura in Kandahar.

This power structure was replicated in the military sphere, with real power remaining in Kandahar, even though the Taliban army had a regional command structure. Four army division headquarters ran the Taliban army on a daily basis, with its main force of 20,000 men concentrated north of Kabul on the Shomali Plain, confronting the Northern Alliance stronghold in the Panjshir valley. Strong forces of more than 15,000 were in the north, holding Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz, and mobile armoured reserves were based in Kabul and Kandahar. In 2001 less than one third of the Taliban forces were made up of old-style Taliban fighters who had been educated in madrasas. The bulk of its 50,000-strong army comprised tribal militia fighters who had been attached to the Taliban army after their leaders made alliances with the regime. Not surprisingly, their loyalty to the Taliban was suspect and a major weakness in its armed forces. There was a rump of technical experts in the Taliban military, who were Pashtun personnel of the old Communist-era army. They numbered only a couple of thousand people and were responsible for flying helicopters and aircraft, operating radars and airfields, repairing tanks and other heavy weapons.



*A rare photograph of the elusive Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Omar.
(DoD)*

The over-extension of the Taliban was increasingly apparent to many of its senior leaders who feared the alliances that allowed it to win so much territory over the previous six years might crack. This increasingly drove the Taliban to rely on Usama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization to augment its military forces.

Bin Laden's role in Al Qaeda has never been revealed in detail but his high public profile and charismatic personality meant in 2001 that very few important decisions were made without his input. He was a close associate of Mullah Omar and regularly met with the Taliban leader to co-ordinate activities. In 2001, Al Qaeda in Afghanistan was run along similar lines to the Taliban with a series of consultative councils or shuras responsible for specific areas of activity. The military shura was responsible for training operatives, acquiring weapons planning attacks and running the network of twenty or so training camps. Its key figures in 2001 were Abu Zubaydah, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Saif al Islam el Masry and Mohammed Atef. The money/business shura funded the recruitment and training of operatives through the hawala banking system. The law shura reviewed Islamic law, and decided whether particular courses of action conform to the law. The Islamic study/fatwa shura issued religious edicts, such as an edict in 1998 telling Muslims to kill Americans. In the late 1990s there was a publicity shura that handled relationships with foreign journalists.

Bin Laden and his senior lieutenants greatly prized their Afghan sanctuary and during the summer of 2001 increasingly made their fighters available to help the Taliban in their war with the Northern Alliance. It is very clear that they were making plans to help to defend the Taliban regime from American retaliation after 9/11 as part of the preparations for their attacks on New York and Washington. The most graphic example of this was a suicide bomb attack on 9 September that killed the charismatic Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in an attempt to plunge the Taliban's strongest opponents in crisis at a key moment.

A key element in Taliban strategic planning was its alliance with Pakistan. The military regime in Islamabad had long viewed Afghanistan as playing an important role in its confrontation with nuclear-armed rival India. The Taliban were seen as a means of preventing India's influence being established in Afghanistan, which might open a second front against Pakistan's army. Also, it potentially provided what the Pakistanis called 'strategic depth' in any major war with India.



An Al Qaeda propaganda poster featuring the organization's leader, Usama bin Laden, discovered during a Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) mission in the Zhawar Kili area of Eastern Afghanistan by US Navy SEAL commandos in January 2002. (US Navy)

The Pakistani military strongman, General Pervez Musharraf, had come to power in 1999 on the back of his role in the Kargil confrontation with India in the disputed province of Kashmir. The cigar smoking and whisky drinking Musharraf had little truck with the Taliban's hardline brand of Islam but saw his country's alliance with them as a piece of realpolitik in Pakistan's forty-four-year confrontation with India.

Pakistani relations with the Taliban were largely the responsibility of the shadowy Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, led in the summer of 2001 by Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed. The powerful ISI is perhaps the most fanatically nationalist part of the Pakistani military and many of its operatives actively embraced the rabid Islamic ideology of their 'friends' in the Taliban, which was implacably hostile to Western Christian, Iranian Shia and Indian Hindu 'infidels'. Sanctions imposed on Pakistan by the US after its nuclear weapon test programme got underway in 1990s fuelled suspicion of the US in the highest levels of the ISI. Ahmed was closely associated with several senior figures in the Taliban regime and regularly travelled to Afghanistan.

Central to the Pakistani strategy in Afghanistan was supporting the Taliban drive to destroy the Northern Alliance, which was viewed by Musharraf as being a 'Trojan horse' for Indian and Russian influence on Pakistan's western border. Moscow was seen by the ISI as a key ally of India that was trying to mobilize the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. Several hundred ISI and Pakistani army advisors were in Afghanistan in the summer of 2001 helping the Taliban army around Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz, as well as running and helping ministries in Kabul. Pakistani money helped fund the Taliban government and without it Afghanistan would have been even more of a basket case than it was in 2001. Crucially, the Taliban were dependent on the Pakistanis for fuel and most basic food stuffs.

Northern Alliance and Anti-Taliban Leaders

The opponents of the Taliban that the US looked to after 9/11 were a disparate group known as the Northern Alliance or United Front, which was an alliance based on several political parties and the forces of more than a dozen military commanders, who have entered legend as Afghanistan's warlords. These men were either former commanders of the anti-Soviet

mujahideen of the 1980s or ex-senior officers in the Communist-era government army.

They wielded power brutally over the regions where their armies held sway but they often became seen as the champions of their tribe or ethnic group. This, in effect, made the Northern Alliance a grouping of all Afghanistan's non-Pasthun ethnic groups. Its main warlords had at various times since 1989 fought each other and, by 2001, the only thing that they had in common was hatred or fear of the Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies.

The most famous warlord was the head of the Tajik forces in the Panjshir valley to the north of Kabul, Ahmad Shah Massoud. He was famously known as the Lion of Panjshir as a result of his success at holding off Soviet troops in the 1980s. The next most senior Tajik commanders were Qasim Fahim and Mohammad Atta, who ran the forces towards the border with Tajikistan around Kunduz and Talaqan. Massoud was a highly charismatic figure who almost single handedly created and held together the United Front in the late 1980s. He began contact with the CIA in the late 1990s and also had good relations with the Russians, Tajik and Uzbek governments, who supplied his troops with arms and equipment. Massoud had some 8,000 to 10,000 troops under arms in the summer of 2001. Not surprisingly, Al Qaeda killed him prior to 9/11 in an attempt to disrupt any counteraction against their Taliban protectors involving the Northern Alliance.

The next most important Northern Alliance commander, was Rashid Dostum, who led the Uzbek forces in the mountains outside Mazar-e-Sharif. Although his force was smaller than Massoud's at only some 3,000 men, his troops were the best trained and disciplined of the anti-Taliban forces. Dostum was a former officer in the communist-era Kabul army and had been trained by the Soviets. He was also the most ruthless and brutal of the warlords, with a reputation for duplicity thrown in. His treatment of prisoners was particularly brutal and his favourite method for disposing of them was to lock dozens of them inside metal shipping containers and leave them to suffocate to death.

In western and central Afghanistan, the opposition to the Taliban was led by the Hazaras, a unique ethnic group who were also Shia Muslims. As a result they had strong links with the Iranians who supplied their 5,000 fighters with weapons. The Hazara stronghold of Bamyan was the victim of the spring 2001 Taliban offensive, causing even more hardship to the Hazara

population who were short of food and medical supplies after the Taliban blockaded their region and cut off all land routes.

In western Afghanistan, the region around the Farsi-speaking city of Herat was also the centre of anti-Taliban resistance under the leadership of Ismail Khan. His militia force had been driven from Herat in 1995 and regularly harassed the Taliban but they were desperately short of arms and ammunition.



Hamid Karzai after his appointment as President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. (NATO)

There was no significant open resistance to the Taliban in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Any opposition in the Pashtun heartland had long been extinguished, with potential rebel leaders killed, driven into exile or bought off. The CIA claimed to have been in contact with twelve Pashtun tribes during the summer of 2001 that were disgruntled with the Taliban, but their chiefs kept their heads down as long as the regime in Kabul seemed invulnerable. The two most prominent exile Pashtun political leaders were Abdul Haq and Hamid Karzai, who both lived in Pakistan in the summer of

2001. They had been involved in the resistance against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Karzai was a political activist but Haq was a famous mujahideen fighter who had lost his leg in battle with the Soviet army. They could not call upon anything like the number of fighters available to Northern Alliance warlords.

US Senior Politicians

The driving force behind the US campaign was President George W. Bush. His position constitutionally as commander-in-chief of all US armed forces meant he was at the centre of all war planning and made crucial decisions in the run-up to and during the conflict. Although he had served as a fighter pilot in the Texas Air National Guard in the 1970s, by all accounts he made no attempt to micro-manage combat operations once they were underway in Afghanistan. He, however, did issue very clear political direction and guidance to his military commanders.

Famously, he declared at a news conference in the aftermath of 9/11 that he wanted Usama bin Laden ‘dead or alive’. This set the tone of the US war planning and Bush issued aggressive directives to the CIA and US military to conduct offensive operations in Afghanistan. He, however, was more at home with the politics of the war and several participants in White House meetings at this time recalled the President being very clear about how he visualized the US operation being portrayed in the US and international media, as well as domestic and foreign public opinion.

The next most important civilian official in the US chain of command, was Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. At sixty-eight, he was the oldest person to hold the post when he was appointed by Bush in January 2001. This was the second time he had been defense secretary and he was legendary for his ability to impose his will on the notoriously slow-moving Pentagon civilian and military bureaucracy. He was often criticized for being a micro-manager but Rumsfeld was a Washington-in-fighter par excellence and knew how to control the levers of power in the American capital. He was determined to bend the Pentagon to his will and was not going to be diverted from his mission to bring it into the twenty-first century.

CIA Director George Tenet (right) briefs President George Bush (second from right) and National Security Advisor Condi Rice (second from left) at

Camp David during September 2001. (White House)



Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld (left) and Commander US Central Command General Tommy Franks at a Pentagon press briefing. The two men were central figures in the war in Afghanistan. (DoD/Helene C. Stikkel)

His buzzword was ‘transformation’ and he saw the US military as a lumbering Cold War leviathan that needed to be given shock treatment to make a nimble organization better suited to the coming conflicts of the new century. One of his first acts on entering office was to cancel the US Army’s multi-billion dollar new armoured howitzer project, which he said was outdated before it had even been built.

Crucial figures in Afghan war planning were retired US General Colin Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage. As Secretary of State, Powell was responsible for persuading key regional allies to allow US forces to operate from their territory, opening the way for the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom. Armitage, Powell’s larger-than-life deputy, played an important role in ensuring Pakistan provided support to the US military mission in Afghanistan.

The US National Security Council (NSC), which in 2001 was chaired by US National Security Advisor Condi Rice, is expected to act as the forum where defence, intelligence and security advice for the president is assessed and agreed. During the Afghan war, it in effect became America’s war cabinet with its principals – including the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA Director, Attorney General and head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation – meeting on a daily basis and their deputies being in almost permanent session, at least by video conference if not in person. Its ability to meet in ‘virtual’ session meant the NSC would be able to decide and implement policy very quickly during the Afghan campaign.



US Vice President Dick Cheney, who was the most hardline member of the Bush administration, poses with US airmen in the dining facility at the US base at Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2004. (US Navy/Journalist 1st Class Kristin Fitzsimmons)

It was Rumsfeld's job to keep US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief General Tommy Franks up to speed on the latest twists in the NSC deliberations and he made several phone calls a day to the General in Tampa. 'Rumsfeld kept Franks on a very tight leash throughout the early months of the war,' according to a senior military officer involved in directing the Afghan campaign.

US Intelligence Chiefs and Diplomats

Director of the Central Intelligence George Tenet's role in the Afghan war cannot be overstated. He had been building up the CIA's links with the Northern Alliance for over three years as a means to provide intelligence on Al Qaeda's 'Afghan Sanctuary'. This included experimenting with operating General Atomics RQ-1 Predator unmanned drones from Uzbekistan to monitor Al Qaeda. One mission in 2000 even spotted a figure believed to be bin Laden. The CIA's involvement in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan

meant it was the only US government agency that had first-hand knowledge of what was happening in the region after the 9/11 attacks.



USAF General Dick Myers, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a visit to Bagram airbase in February 2002. He often found himself cut out of the loop on Afghan war planning by Donald Rumsfeld who wanted to deal directly with General Franks. (US Army/ Pfc Jeremy W. Guthrie)

During the late 1990s Tenet expanded the CIA Counter Terrorism Center (CTC) and established a unit within it specifically to monitor bin Laden. The unit developed a specific plan to use the Northern Alliance, backed by missile-armed Predators, to roll back the Taliban to expose Al Qaeda's Afghan bases and camps but this did not find favour with US President Bill Clinton's administration or Bush's new team.

Tenet appointed Cofer Black as head of the CTC in 1999 and, by September 2001, he was one of the most knowledgeable senior officials in the US government on Afghanistan and bin Laden. He was also one of the CIA's most experience covert operatives and had led the operation to capture the master terrorist Carlos the Jackal in the Sudan. The CTC had also grown

into a powerful virtual command centre with computer databases packed with intelligence on Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. While the CTC was not able to predict and prevent the 9/11 attacks, it did play a crucial role in the war in Afghanistan, becoming the partner of US Central Command in running and directing the war. The CTC Special Operations (CTC/SO) branch, headed by Henry ‘Hank’ Crumpton, ran a team of CIA intelligence operatives inside Afghanistan and around the region during the war. Crumpton led the development of the CIA’s war plan and on several occasions he briefed President Bush on it and major events in the war. The influence of the CIA figures, such as Black and Crumpton, was decisive at key moments during the first months of the Afghan campaign. ‘I can not stress how instrumental the CIA was in this war,’ commented one military officer who was able to observe the Agency influence first hand.



Cofer Black headed the CIA Counter-Terrorism Centre during 2001 and was a key figure running the US war in Afghanistan. (CIA)

The then CIA station chief in Pakistan, Bob Grenier, played a crucial role in the Afghan war. His role in working with anti-Taliban Pashtun leaders was instrumental in the emergence of Hamid Karzai as head of Afghanistan's interim government in December 2001. During the early weeks of the campaign he became a leading member of the CIA's unofficial 'Pashtun lobby', which pushed for the interests of the southern tribes and Pakistan to be factored into US war plans.

The CIA team sent into Afghanistan in mid September 2001 to link up with anti-Taliban forces was led by veteran paramilitary operatives. The key team, known as Jawbreaker, was led at first by Gary Schroen and then by his replacement, Gary Berntsen. Both had visited the Panjshir valley before and so were trusted by leaders of the Northern Alliance. This greatly eased the establishment of co-operation between US and the largest group of anti-Taliban forces.

US Military Commanders

The commander of CENTCOM, General Franks, stands as the dominant figure of the US campaign in Afghanistan.

The Vietnam and 1991 Iraq war veteran was instrumental in developing the innovative US campaign in Afghanistan because of his position as commander of all US forces deployed in the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Franks developed a good working relationship with Bush and Rumsfeld. Although Franks cultivated his 'good ol' boy' Texan image, he had a strong interest in the use of artillery and air power, as well as advanced internet-based communications systems. He was more than willing to embrace many of the 'transformational' ideas espoused by Rumsfeld.

Franks' special forces component commander, Rear Admiral Bert Calland, was at the heart of working out many of the details of the special forces deployment into Afghanistan. He was the General's 'trouble shooter' on the ground in Afghanistan and spent the first weeks of the campaign shuttling

between Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan to ensure co-operation between the US military, CIA and Northern Alliance leaders.

Air operations across the Middle East and Central Asia were the responsibility of US Air Force Lieutenant General 'Chuck' Wald. He was a strong advocate of air power and a 'front leader'. When in charge of a US airbase in Italy in 1999 he flew combat missions over Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war. Even before the Afghan war erupted, Wald was closely involved in operations in the Middle East, running the air campaign to enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq. His hi-tech headquarters in Saudi Arabia, known as the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC), was already up and running in September 2001, manned by several hundred staff, planning and intelligence officers. Wald also had aircraft operating from several airbases in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) so had working relationships with key regional allies. This meant Wald and his planners were well placed to ramp up their air operations to fight the coming campaign in Afghanistan. The USAF General and his team, however, were used to waging the air campaign against Iraq with only limited involvement from senior leadership at CENTCOM, so when Franks and his staff started to become involved in closely managing air operations there was tension with Wald and his team.



Senior US Army officers plan Operation Anaconda at Bagram airbase in February 2001. Lt Col Ronald Corkran (left), commander of the 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), makes a point to Col Frank Wiercinski (right), commander of Task Force Rakkasan. In the centre is Lt Col Paul Lacamera, commander of the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry). (US Army/Spc David Marck Jr)

Colonel John Mulholland, commander of the US Army's 5th Special Forces Group was a veteran Special Forces officer with extensive experience of working with unconventional military organizations. He oversaw the establishment of the main US support base in Uzbekistan in September 2001 and then the initial movement of US troops into Afghanistan. The US Army's Special Forces are a distinct unit in their own right and specialize in what is dubbed unconventional warfare to work with indigenous armed forces, paramilitary units and guerrilla forces.

The ultra-secret Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) was led by Major General Dell Dailey in 2001 and he played an important role leading direct action operations against Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in southern Afghanistan during October and November 2001. As well as being a veteran of the elite 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, Dailey was well-versed in Washington Beltway politics to position his JSOC to undertake high profile missions.

Major General 'Buster' Hagenbeck was the senior US Army conventional commander in the Afghan theatre during December 2001 and into 2002. The commander of the 10th Mountain Division was desperate to get his men into combat but only had a small portion of his command with him.

Major General Dell Dailey was the controversial head of the super secret or 'black' US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) during its Afghan mission in 2001. He is pictured here after he was subsequently appointed as counter-terrorist official in the US State Department. (State Department)



United Kingdom Political and Military Leaders

The United Kingdom proved to be America's stalwart ally during the opening phase of the Afghan campaign. The tone of this co-operation was

set by Prime Minister Tony Blair who pledged British support for the US during a visit to Washington in the aftermath of 9/11.

Anglo-US co-operation was subsequently in the hands of a few senior officials and military commanders. The head of the UK Secret Intelligence Service or MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, travelled to the US on 12 September 2001 to meet CIA chief Tenet and make initial plans for operations against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Britain's armed forces were led by Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, who had only taken over as Chief of the Defence Staff earlier in the year. He was a submariner by background but his experience of covert operations with the US against Soviet submarines during the Cold War made him at home in the post-9/11 world, where discrete co-operation with the US military and intelligence agencies, in what would soon be dubbed the Global War on Terror, was now the order of the day.

Britain's Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, and General Franks during a visit of the Central Command chief to London. The UK was the only US ally to directly participate with combat forces in the opening phase of the Afghan war. (DoD)



In this new environment, Britain's special forces would have a key role and their chief in 2001, Brigadier Graeme Lamb, was well suited to the task. The former Highlander has spent most of his military career in the Special Air Services (SAS) Regiment. He was one of the British Army's most innovative operational and tactical thinkers and had plenty of experience working with his US counterparts in JSOC.

The largest British special forces unit, 22 SAS Regiment, was led by a former Guards officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ed Butler, and it, along with his counterpart in the Special Boat Service, Lieutenant Colonel James Saunders, would play an important role on Operation Enduring Freedom.

A very different type of British soldier would also play a key role in the opening moves of the Afghan campaign. Major General John McColl had commanded 3 (UK) Division for just over a year when the Afghan war began. His divisional headquarters was at high readiness for overseas deployments in the summer and autumn of 2001. Described as one of the British Army's most 'well balanced' generals, who showed 'great common sense' in most circumstances, he was well placed to lead the first

international security mission to Kabul in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban.

Chapter 4

'They Will Hear from Us'

In the chaotic aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington the US government and the country's military leadership were at first pre-occupied with security measures to prevent further attacks. US airspace was closed down to commercial traffic, fighter air patrols were launched over major cities, and police and intelligence agencies ramped up security activity to prevent any more hijackings or similar attacks. In New York and Washington rescue activities were underway in earnest to find the dead and wounded.

Senior US government leaders and many military commanders were working around the clock to get on the top of this unprecedented situation. For many days it was still thought that tens of thousands of people had died when the Twin Towers collapsed in New York. Protocols to ensure continuity of government were activated and many key leaders and officials were moved to remote locations to prevent a future Al Qaeda 'decapitation' attack.

Not surprisingly, it took four days for President Bush to convene a meeting of his National Security Council (NSC) to determine what to do next. The day before Bush had travelled to New York to visit 'ground zero', talk to relatives of the victims of the attack and famously addressed rescue workers on the still smouldering rubble. When he told the exhausted workers that 'the people who knocked these buildings will hear all of us soon', it was clear that he had made his mind up to strike back against Al Qaeda.

The meeting at the Camp David retreat in the Maryland hills to the east of Washington DC with Bush on 15 September to brainstorm options would set the course of America's response. All of Bush's senior advisors were present

and CIA chief George Tenet crucially kicked off the proceedings. He brought with him a PowerPoint briefing titled 'Going to War', which set out in bullet point-style the latest intelligence on Al Qaeda, its Afghan sanctuary and an updated version of the Agency's earlier plan to drive the Taliban from power. This expanded on a plan that had been briefed to Bush on 13 September by Cofer Black, the head of the CIA Counter Terrorism Center. It envisaged the US supplying the Northern Alliance with arms and money to drive the Taliban from power. Strong backing from American air power and millions of dollars to bribe tribal leaders would ensure success. Tenet was also to reveal that the CIA already had Predators operating over Afghanistan from neighbouring Uzbekistan. Simultaneously, as the US military and CIA cover operatives were fighting in Afghanistan, American intelligence and law enforcement agencies would launch a global campaign against Al Qaeda cells in more than seventy countries. He presented Bush with a list of authorizations or 'findings' to allow CIA paramilitary operatives to try to kill bin Laden and other members of Al Qaeda, as well as to arm its Predators with AGM-114 Hellfire laser-guided missiles. The CIA chief clearly appeared on top of the subject and Bush was impressed that he was the 'man with a plan'.

This compared badly with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton who had to admit that the US military had no contingency plans to invade Afghanistan. He presented three options. The first was an immediate strike by Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs). The second proposal was a TLAM strike backed by heavy manned bombers. His final option was an air campaign combined with a ground operation by special forces. These options were very raw and Shelton said deployments for forces would depend on basing agreements and overflight rights being made with several states around Afghanistan. For three days, General Tommy Franks and his team at US Central Command in Tampa, Florida, which was responsible for the Middle East and Central Asia, had been building war plans for robust action in Afghanistan but Shelton said they would not be ready for around week.

US President George W Bush makes his famous 'They will hear us' speech to rescue workers amid the rubble of Ground Zero in New York on 14 September 2001. (White House)



Bush left his advisors and spent a day contemplating his options. On 17 September, he called back the NSC for a White House meeting and started issuing orders. He signed all of Tenet's proposed findings and the head of the CIA said he would have teams of operatives in Central Asia by the end of the week to begin working with the Northern Alliance.

Bush ordered his Secretary of State retired General Colin Powell, to issue an ultimatum to the Taliban to break links with Al Qaeda and hand over bin Laden. The hunt was now on in earnest to find bases in countries neighbouring Afghanistan. Many in the US government and military had recognized that the Pakistan position was crucial. On 13 September, Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage had drafted a list of demands for the Pakistani president, General Pervez Musharraf. These included blanket overflight and basing rights for US forces, closing down access to Pakistani territory for Al Qaeda, intelligence co-operation and information sharing, stopping anti-US propaganda in Pakistan, cutting off fuel supplies to the Taliban to prevent Pakistani volunteers joining the Taliban and, finally, breaking diplomatic relations with Kabul should the Taliban continue to harbour Al Qaeda. This was Bush's 'you are for us or against us' threat made real. Armitage invited the head of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI)

agency, General Mahmood Ahmed, who happened to be in Washington on 9/11, to the State Department and presented him with the demands. The next day, Powell telephoned Musharraf to get the President's response. He said Pakistan would support the US on all of its demands. On 19 September, Musharraf addressed the people of Pakistan and stated that, while he opposed military attacks against the Taliban, Pakistan risked being endangered by an alliance of India and the US if it did not cooperate. Later, Musharraf claimed in his memoirs that Armitage had threatened that the US would 'bomb Pakistan back to the stone age' if it did not turn its back on the Taliban and Al Qaeda. He said Armitage described the demands as 'non-negotiable'. Should Pakistan accept, it would be considered a United States ally. Should it decline, Pakistan would be considered an enemy, recalled the President. Armitage denied having made the bombing quote.

Simultaneously, as this activity was underway in Washington, Franks and his key staff were developing details of war plans for the coming operation in Afghanistan. Although they understood the sketchy details of the CIA's links with the Northern Alliance, the CENTCOM planners had little understanding or knowledge of Afghanistan. Their plan was strong on logistics and deployment schedules but they had little hard intelligence on the location of Al Qaeda forces or the senior Taliban leaders. There was good intelligence on the Taliban's air defence and radar networks and deployment of its tanks and artillery but beyond that, CENTCOM was dependent on the CIA for information.

For a week, Franks and his staff worked almost around the clock to develop strategic, operational and tactical plans to drive the Taliban regime from power and then move US ground forces into Afghanistan to hunt down bin Laden and his movement. They built a four-phase plan for the coming campaign, which was aggressive and daring. There would be no more pinprick cruise missile strikes on remote Al Qaeda camps. This time there would be US 'boots on the ground' and the campaign would be pressed on until victory was achieved. The first phase would set the conditions for the campaign and give senior commanders viable options. Next would follow an initial combat phase to secure control of Afghan air space and begin the initial insertion of up to 12,500 US ground forces, which were initially envisaged as being predominately special forces who would join with anti-Taliban elements such as the Northern Alliance. The third phase was focused on decisive combat operations to defeat the Taliban and its Al Qaeda allies

throughout Afghanistan. The final phase would build up coalition forces in Afghanistan to prevent the re-emergence of a Taliban regime and provide humanitarian assistance to the country's civilian population.

His senior commanders and staff were already working the telephones with regional allies for bases. In the wake of Powell's demarche, the Pakistanis were being very co-operative and had identified a couple of airbases but Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had not yet committed to providing bases for US military forces, although only ten days after 9/11 they were already helping CIA covert teams enter Afghanistan. Oman had agreed to provide a base for US special forces and aircraft. Franks had also asked the US Navy to provide an aircraft carrier as a floating base off the Pakistani coast for special forces' helicopters. Preparations were also well in hand to move Boeing B-52H Stratofortress and Rockwell B-1B Lancer bombers, plus supporting air-to-air refuelling tankers, to the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia ready for any eventuality. Additional TLAM-firing warships and submarines, as well as two aircraft carriers, were also on their way to the Indian Ocean.

On 20 September, Franks' plan was developed enough for him to travel to Washington to brief Bush, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Rumsfeld was happy with the work to date, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were less enthusiastic about Franks' plans and the heads of the US Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corps spent an afternoon complaining that the CENTCOM chief's plans did not include enough forces from their respective military services. Rumsfeld told Franks to ignore them and press on with his planning. From this point on Rumsfeld would increasingly bypass the Joint Chiefs and deal directly with Franks on all aspects of the Afghan war.

Bush was also impressed when he was briefed by Franks the following day. The President stressed that he wanted the attack to be focused on the Taliban and Al Qaeda, rather the Afghan people, and welcomed the inclusion in the plan of airdrops of humanitarian aid to the civilian population. He wanted this included as a key message in US propaganda about the imminent conflict. Franks said his forces would be ready to begin the operation in around two weeks' time and the President said he could wait until then.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visits General Tommy Franks Tampa Headquarters on 30 November to assess the progress of the Afghan war. (US Centcom)





The military situation in September 2001. The dark red area was held by Tajik Northern Alliance forces and the striped area was held by Uzbek and Hazara forces. (DoD)

The work of the CIA and CENTCOM planners was happening in parallel during this period but it is clear that the intelligence agency's years of preparation and greater understanding of Afghanistan meant its influence on US war plans was unprecedented.

One aspect that concerned Bush and other senior US government leaders was the almost total lack of detailed intelligence on the location of bin Laden, as well as other Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. The twenty or so suspected Al Qaeda training camps that US intelligence had identified in Afghanistan were long suspected of being emptied. Some senior analysts suspected that bin Laden would be in southern Afghanistan so he could be close to the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar but this was little more than an educated guess that would subsequently prove completely off the

mark. The Al Qaeda leader, it seems, spent most of September, October and early November in a series of safe houses around Kabul.

The CIA had also drawn a blank on finding bin Laden, even though they had helped the Northern Alliance set up a signals intelligence system in 2000 to monitor Taliban and Al Qaeda radio communications.

Separately, the ultra-secret or 'black' Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) was directed by Bush to deploy to Oman to be ready to launch snap 'kill or capture' raids in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the Middle East against senior Al Qaeda leaders should any intelligence emerge. By late September the only hint they had was a suggestion that Al Qaeda had set up a possible weapons of mass destruction manufacturing facility in a disused fertilizer factory near Mazar-e-Sharif. The information was very vague and was not considered good enough to launch a raid.

Bush agreed to a request by Franks that the command relationship between the CIA, JSOC and CENTCOM be formalized before any operation began to prevent confusion and ensure that there was a 'single button to push' when the fighting started.

With the outline of the overall American strategy agreed, it was now up to the operational level commanders in the US military and the CIA to craft their tactical battle plans, deploy their forces and build a command system to run the war effort. On the military side all these things had to be built almost from scratch. The CIA Counter Terrorist Center (CTC), however, was ahead of the game and it already had a rudimentary command and control network up and running, had opened links with the Northern Alliance and was in the process of putting assets on the ground in Afghanistan. More importantly, its experts and senior leaders had thought through over several months the type of campaign needed to defeat the Taliban to open the way to allow Al Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan to be mopped up.

On 3 October a CIA team led by Hank Crumpton from the CTC met with General Tommy Franks to present their views of how the war should be fought. This followed a meeting in Washington involving senior members of the Bush administration in which an eight-page analysis from the CIA station chief in Islamabad, Bob Grenier, was discussed. Grenier's recommendations were initially taken on board and they became a major component of the joint CIA-CENTCOM war planning.

The CIA team proposed to Franks that the aim of the US campaign should not be to physically occupy terrain but to sow fear and uncertainty in the ranks of the Taliban. It was hoped this would eventually lead to widespread defections from the Taliban that would force the collapse of its military forces and regime. Once this had been achieved, Al Qaeda's network of camps and other facilities would be uncovered, allowing detailed intelligence to be gathered and direct action to be taken to seize or destroy Al Qaeda personnel.



Hank Crumpton during a visit to Afghanistan. The CIA official is credited by many sources as being the mastermind and driving force behind the US campaign in Afghanistan in 2001. (Rhonda Shore – Office of the Coordinator For Counterterrorism)

Detailed proposals for how US air power should be used, as well as propaganda messages and diplomatic moves, needed to further the isolation of the Taliban were included in the CIA plans. These messages would be delivered by propaganda leaflets, high-profile speeches by US and coalition political leaders and in scripts for American personnel to use when they met Afghan tribal leaders. At the heart of these was the message that the US was

only attacking followers of Al Qaeda and not the Afghan people. This message would be reinforced if the US did not introduce large numbers of conventional troops or build up big bases to avoid creating the image that the US was occupying Afghanistan, in the manner of the Soviets. By limiting bombing to rural areas and putting civilian infrastructure off limits to air strikes, the civilian population would also not feel they were being targeted. While all these things chimed with President Bush's ideas and CENTCOM's initial war plans, the CIA provided detailed operational proposals for the first time about how to translate them into actions on the ground.

The CIA planning team stressed that the US air campaign needed to be highly focused and calibrated away from populated areas and concentrated on Al Qaeda targets. The opening strike of the war was envisaged as being a 'measured' exercise that would hit military targets outside urban areas to convince the civilian population that they were not being directly targeted, while being big enough to convince the country's warlords and tribal leaders that the US was serious about toppling the Taliban. This was crucial to overturn the image of the previous desultory US cruise missiles strikes in 1998 because opponents of the Taliban would actively rise in revolt only if they were convinced the Americans were serious about following through on their military campaign. The CIA plan included suggestions for tight rules of engagement (ROE) to limit the scope and impact of specific air strikes. At this stage it was envisaged that 85 per cent of all US bombing would be interdiction against high-value military targets behind the Taliban front and would only be initiated by CIA intelligence or imagery from satellites or Predators. The remaining bombing would be close air support (CAS) against front-line positions and this would be controlled by US military forward air controllers who were to be inserted into Northern Alliance territory to work along side the CIA's liaison teams. They would work hand-in-glove, with the CIA team concentrating on keeping the Northern Alliance senior leadership onside through the payment of millions of dollars in cash, and the military teams providing the crucial linkage to airborne US firepower.

Afghanistan's dramatic geography and political borders. (DoD)





B-52H Stratofortress bombers were some of the first USAF aircraft to deploy to Diego Garcia in September 2001 to prepare for the assault on Afghanistan. (USAF/SSgt Larry A. Simmons)

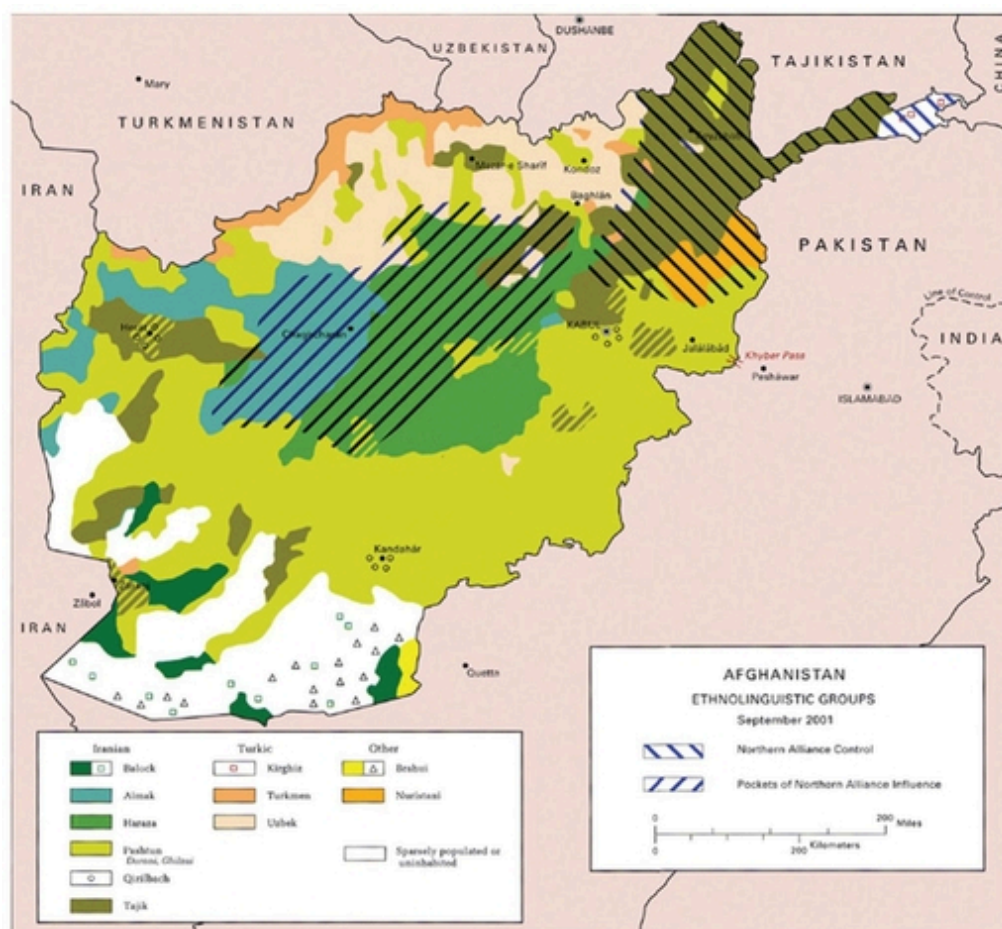
Although this plan centred on using the Northern Alliance to defeat the Taliban militarily, the CIA team said that the Pashtun south would never turn against the Taliban if they feared that the Tajiks and Uzbek-led Northern Alliance was going to dominate the country. For that reason, the Northern Alliance was going to be warned not to move out of its tribal area or to even think about capturing Kabul. They were to be promised that a United Nations peacekeeping force would occupy the city and make it neutral territory to allow time for a representative post-Taliban government to be formed. This would reassure the Pakistanis and make it more likely they would co-operate with anti-Taliban measures along the border with Afghanistan and stop providing aid to the Taliban regime. It would also allow time for Pashtun tribes to be won over to the anti-Taliban cause and a so-called 'Southern Alliance' built up. This aspect of the plan was controversial within the CIA and around Washington. Many CTC staff and team leaders on the ground in and around Afghanistan were not convinced that the southern tribes would ever turn on the Taliban or that the Northern Alliance could be controlled in the way some in Washington imagined. The National Security Council in Washington would revisit this issue on an almost daily basis over the next six weeks as events on the ground spiralled out of control.

As the countdown to war gathered momentum, the US plans were still evolving and even the CIA admitted there were major gaps in its knowledge of the situation on the ground. The best guess of both the CIA and CENTCOM planners was that the Taliban would put up tough resistance and it would take time to build the Northern Alliance into an effective fighting force. Initial assessments suggested that it might take three months to capture the major towns in northern Afghanistan and the capital Kabul. Some CENTCOM planners also envisaged that the Northern Alliance would not be ready to strike against the Taliban in any strength until the spring of 2002 at the earliest. This would mean the JSOC 'kill and capture' raids would have to be carried out before the Taliban regime had collapsed.

Franks, however, recognized the potential of the plan and embraced its main elements. He then set in train a series of measures to increase co-operation between CENTCOM and the CIA to turn it into reality.

The CIA and CENTCOM moved rapidly to bind the military and CIA operations in Afghanistan into a seamless whole. This included the sharing

with CENTCOM of the CIA real-time 'operational picture' of the Afghanistan theatre to provide an unprecedented view of the war. This was a computer-generated map of the region, with positions of US military units, CIA teams, Northern Alliance units, enemy forces and no-strike zones displayed on it. A CENTCOM general took up residence in the CTC at the CIA's Langley, Virginia, headquarters and a high-ranking CIA official was posted to work in the main CENTCOM operations room in Tampa. These two facilities became the engine room of the US operation in Afghanistan, with Franks at CENTCOM and the head of the CTC, Cofer Black, in effect becoming joint commanders of the US campaign. Franks sent his special operations commander, Rear Admiral Bert Calland, to Uzbekistan to travel into Afghanistan with the first CIA teams and then to stay in the region to smooth co-operation between CIA and military personnel on the ground.



Afghanistan's complex ethnic and religious groupings were an important element in the country's political and military situation in 2001. (DoD)



Afghanistan's war weary population had endured several foreign invasions, numerous civil wars and natural disasters in the thirty years preceding 2001.

(USAF SSgt Derrick C. Goode)

This was not welcomed by some in the US military and CENTCOM because it led to the dumping of several well-worn military procedures. The most unpopular move with the US Air Force was the stripping of the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) in Saudi Arabia of its traditional role of selecting bombing targets. In military jargon, this in the past had been delegated to the CENTCOM air component commander, USAF Lieutenant General Chuck Wald and his staff in the CAOC. Under established US military doctrine the theatre commander, in this case Franks, would usually decide his intent and then CAOC staff would determine which targets would be attacked to achieve the desired effect. For the Afghan war, Franks pulled this power back to his headquarters in Tampa and the CAOC was reduced to organizing attacks on specific targets designated by CENTCOM. A joint CENTCOM-CIA targeting board was set up to plan the air war. At its daily meetings the board set out the weight of the bombing effort over the coming month and in more detail over the next seven days. This set the number of bombing sorties and type of weapons to be used, as well as specific targets. These requirements were then passed on to the CAOC planners who wrote the daily air tasking order, or ATO, which was the actual order to launch aircraft at specific times. It allowed USAF and Navy logistics planners at the CAOC to have the necessary planes, fuel and weapons in place at the right time. A joint CIA-military operations team at CENTCOM worked around the clock to be ready to fine-tune bombing missions when they were in the air or direct aircraft to emerging targets. They were also able to choreograph the political and diplomatic guidance from the National Security Council in Washington on the higher level strategic direction of the US war effort.

US Navy ordnance men move laser-guided bombs to waiting aircraft on the USS Carl Vinson in preparation for strikes against Al Qaeda training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. (DoD/Petty Officer 1st Class Greg Messier)



CIA and USAF RQ-1B Predator unmanned aerial vehicles or drones were operating over Afghanistan within hours of the 9/11 attacks and had a real-time view of the situation on the ground. (USAF TSgt Joe Springfield)

The CIA was also far in advance of the US military when it came to information technology, satellite communications and exploiting real-time surveillance systems, such as the General Atomics RQ-1 Predator unmanned drone. CIA teams preparing to deploy into Afghanistan would take lightweight portable laptop computers, linked up to broadband internet capacity satellite radios, with them. Unlike the military, the CIA was not bound by strict military hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures. For the Afghan operation it did not designate a country station chief, and all its teams on the ground reported direct to the CTC. They adopted what is termed a 'flat command structure', with all the teams sharing all their intelligence and other information across a open computer network. This meant that time-critical information could be in the hands of senior CTC officials only a few minutes after events occurred in Afghanistan. CENTCOM had nothing like this and information from special forces' teams on the ground had to be filtered manually through at least two headquarters before it reached Franks and his senior staff. Also, the CIA had far more satellite and internet bandwidth available to it for the Afghan operation than CENTCOM. This meant CIA teams on the ground in Afghanistan could watch streaming video from Predator drones, while military's internet connections rapidly got clogged up with messages and they soon had to organize a queue system to ensure priority emails got where they were meant to in anything like a reasonable time. Not surprisingly, the CIA was more often than not first to report critical information from Afghanistan back to Washington and its credibility duly soared among senior political leaders. The CIA's information network also worked the other way and allowed teams on the ground to rapidly receive top-level intelligence gathered by US strategic imagery satellites or signals intelligence collection satellites and aircraft.

Chapter 5

On the Brink of War

While the building up of the CIA-CENTCOM command structure was underway and the US battle plan was being developed, American commanders were rushing to get their forces into striking distance of Afghanistan to meet Franks' promise to Bush.

The CIA was also well ahead of CENTCOM in this respect thanks to its efforts since 1999 to build up links with the Northern Alliance, as well as the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It had seen five liaison missions to the Northern Alliance under the code name Jawbreaker up to March 2001 and several veterans of these visits were drafted back to participate in the new effort. The first of six CIA liaison teams was on the ground in Uzbekistan within two weeks of 9/11, ready to move into Afghanistan.

The Agency already had its Predators operating from Uzbekistan over Afghanistan and the components would soon be in the Central Asian country to allow the drones to be modified to fire laser-guided AGM-114 Hellfire missiles. It also owned a fleet of Russian-made Mil Mi-17 helicopters, which were also up and running from Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan. On 27 September, the first CIA liaison team, code name Jawbreaker, was flown on one of these helicopters into the Panjshir valley to link up with Northern Alliance high command.

Within a week, several more teams, each five to six strong, were inserted to establish communications with all the main Northern Alliance groups. The first teams to be inserted had gone into the Panjshir valley to co-operate with General Fahim Khan, who had taken over as the Northern Alliance's top military commander after the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud, to operate close to the Shomali Plain front and further north near Taloqan. Team Alpha

had linked up with General Dostum outside Mazar-e-Sharif at the end of September. Plans for further teams were well advanced, with one designated to get to western Afghanistan near Herat. Another, Team Delta, was to go to Bamyan in the centre of the country to work with the Hazaras. Team Echo was building up in Pakistan ready to work with Pashtun tribes in the south and east of Afghanistan. This operation was launched in co-operation with the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) to try to build up Pashtun opposition to the Taliban.



A USAF B-52H Stratofortress from the 40th Air Expeditionary Wing lands at Diego Garcia after flying a mission in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. In the first 68 days of the Afghan war, the Air Force flew more than 6,800 sorties, which is about 46 per cent of all US air missions. (USAF SSgt Shane Cuomo)

The arrival of the Jawbreaker team in the Panjshir valley gave the US 'eyes on' the Taliban for the first time since the last CIA liaison visit the previous March. The team conducted a series of 'mapping patrols' along the front line in the Shomali Plain and further north near Talaqan. Using binoculars, maps and GPS satellite navigation devices, they pin-pointed the positions of hundreds of Taliban bunkers, tanks, artillery pieces, command posts and supply dumps. These were all converted into three-dimensional co-ordinates (latitude, longitude and elevation) to allow satellite-guided Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM), which were the USAF's 'weapon of choice' to be targeted at night or in bad weather with only a couple of

metres' margin of error. The Jawbreaker team brought several dozen GPS devices with local language controls and dials to allow Northern Alliance intelligence operatives working behind Taliban lines to pin-point the location of targets for air attack.

The need to build options by gaining access to a spread of bases on both Afghanistan's northern and southern border to exploit every opportunity to attack was central to US plans. Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, drove a hard bargain. It took visits from James Bolton, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security on 28 September and Franks on 30 September, followed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on 5 October, as well as promises of more than US\$150 million, before Karimov agreed to open K2 airbase to US forces.

US survey teams had been at K2 as the deal was being finalized but heavy transport aircraft carrying helicopter, communications equipment and other heavy gear were held at the US airbases at Ramstein in Germany and Incirlik in Turkey pending the go-order. Many of troops of the 5th Special Forces Group, which were designated to eventually deploy into Afghanistan to work with the CIA and Northern Alliance, were on exercise in Jordan and Egypt in early September and were soon poised to fly to K2 when the order was given. There were only a few dozen of them but the 5th Special Forces Group needed to set up a command post and supply bases before they could be inserted across the border. There was still some confusion about the composition of the special forces' teams that would deploy into Afghanistan, with rival parts of the US special forces community vying to lead the missions. The US Army's Special Forces or 'Green Berets' were famous as the US military's unconventional warfare specialists after their leading role in the Vietnam War, advising and leading local troops. There was little doubt they would take on a similar role in Afghanistan but other branches of the US special forces community were pushing for a piece of the action and a leading role in the most high-profile US military operation for several generations.



F-15E Strike Eagles are prepared for bombing missions into Afghanistan from Al Jaber airbase in Kuwait. The jets were the main USAF fast jet contribution to the Afghan air campaign. (USAF MSgt Dave Nolan)

Link-ups with Northern Alliance forces were initially planned to take place near Mazar-e-Sharif, Kunduz and north of Bagram. CIA Special Activities Division operatives were the first Americans to move into Afghanistan, flying to link up with Northern Alliance leaders on several ex-Russian Mil Mi-17 helicopters. Once in place the CIA teams were to secure permission for US Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams from the 5th Special Forces Group to link up with Northern Alliance forces. ODAs were eight to twelve man-strong teams and were self-contained units trained and equipped to work with local forces. Crucially they brought with them laser range finders and satellite radios to allow them to act as forward air controllers (FACs) for US strike aircraft and bombers. Due to the first teams being inserted by helicopters, they would have to carry all their equipment in rucksacks, on mules or pick-up trucks hired from local people once they landed in Afghanistan.

Although K2's position was the ideal for the coming operation, being just under 200 miles from Mazar-e-Sharif, its runway could not accommodate the USAF's giant Lockheed C-5 Galaxy transports. So a system of cross-loading was set up at Incirlik, where the bigger jets would bring cargo from the US or Germany and then transfer them to the big Boeing C-17 Globemaster III and smaller Lockheed C-130 Hercules for the final leg into K2. This network of bases was also a key element in the US Logistic Task Force that was set up to provide support to the CIA and special forces teams on the ground in Afghanistan, as well as make parachute drops of arms, ammunition and equipment to the Northern Alliance and humanitarian aid to the civilian population. While Ramstein and Incirlik were more than ten hours' flying time away from Afghanistan, the bases had the infrastructure needed to pack and load efficiently the huge amounts of cargo needed. The USAF's Air Mobility Command had more than enough planes and crews to keep the air-bridge into K2 open indefinitely.

Within hours of agreement on basing being made with the Uzbek government on 5 October, C-17 transports began arriving at a rate of one aircraft every two hours. On the first aircraft were helicopters of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and maintenance crews immediately set to work to get them ready to fly combat search and rescue (CSAR) in support of the US air campaign. Within a week, more than 1,000 US personnel had turned K2 into a major military base. Colonel John Mulholland, the commander of the 5th Special Forces Group, was

designated commander of the newly established Joint Special Operations Task Force-North. This would soon be re-named Task Force Dagger.

The first US helicopters to deploy within range of northern Afghanistan were Sikorsky MH-47E Chinooks from D Company, 2nd Battalion of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), as well as a pair of Sikorsky MH-60L Direct Action Penetrator (DAP) helicopters, supported by two USAF HC-130P Combat Shadow tankers of the 9th Special Operations Squadron (SOS).

USAF security police officer, TSgt Ivan Herrera, stands watch over two KC-10 refuelling aircraft at Al Udeid airbase in Qatar in October 2001. (USAF SSgt Michael Gaddis)





An B-1 Lancer bomber, from the 28th Air Expeditionary Wing, takes off for Afghanistan from Diego Garcia on 23 October 2001 as part of the USAF bomber campaign from the British-controlled Indian Ocean island. (USAF SSgt Shane Cuomo)

A handful of planners in the Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) at K2 were pre-occupied with developing plans to start moving troops into Afghanistan. This small co-ordination cell within the headquarters of Task Force Dagger was responsible for organizing the movement by air of US special operations forces and directing requests from front-line US troops for offensive air support to the USAF-run CAOC at Prince Sultan Airbase (PSAB) in Saudi Arabia.

After 9/11, Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf immediately realized the seriousness of the US threat to turn his country into a target if he did not drop his links with the Taliban. He agreed to open two air corridors across Pakistan from the Indian Ocean and to allow access to Pakistani airbases. Although for public relations reasons to avoid upsetting Taliban supporters among the Pakistani public and intelligence services, the bases were only publicly referred to as being for search and rescue forces. The reality was more extensive and involved the US setting up a major air hub at

Jacobabad airbase in the northern Punjab for USAF helicopters and transport aircraft, as well as Predators of the CIA and the USAF's 57th Wing. It was also the primary diversion site for US aircraft in the region. Forward-operating bases were opened at Dalbandin, Pasni, Shamsi and Quetta to preposition fuel for helicopters heading into Afghanistan.

As US officers gained access to bases in Pakistan during late September, it became clear that Jacobabad was not big enough, nor did it have the fuel and other supply infrastructure to host the dozens of helicopters needed to allow US special forces to rapidly open a southern front across the Pakistani border. To help overcome this problem, the carrier USS Kitty Hawk was rapidly converted into a 'lily pad' helicopter carrier and dispatched from its home base in Japan. Its helicopters were to stage through the forward operating bases in Pakistan, en route to objectives in Afghanistan.

Oman's role proved critical to the Afghan campaign. It opened the airbase on Masirah Island to US forces, allowing them to activate pre-positioned tents, command post and aircraft ground-handling equipment. Masirah became the forward headquarters of Task Force Sword or, as it was later known, Task Force 11, which controlled the US special forces destined to operate in southern Afghanistan. This was led by Major General Dell Dailey and included a strong contingent of his Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) direct action units. The focus of Dailey's operation was the Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership around Kandahar. USAF Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunships, MC-130 Combat Talon deep penetration transports and HC-130 Combat Shadow tankers, as well as MH-53 Pave Low helicopters, soon arrived to give Dailey's forces the reach and firepower they needed to strike into Afghanistan.

The USAF-run CAOC at PSAB was at the heart of this initial planning as CENTCOM's largest major forward-deployed operational headquarters in the Middle East region. USAF Lieutenant General Chuck Wald commanded the No Fly Zone mission over Iraq from the CAOC but also in theory had responsibility for air operations across the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR), which stretched from the Horn of Africa into Central Asia.

Middle East airbases would play a key role in the US-led assault on Afghanistan and Wald's staff were instrumental in opening up access to these bases, using their long-established links to regional governments and air forces. Many governments in the region were not keen to be publicly

identified with the US campaign in Afghanistan because of a fear of a backlash from their populations, which contained large anti-American elements. Saudi Arabia refused to allow any of its airbases to be used in the campaign and the UAE, Qatar and Oman ordered media blackouts on their assistance to the US and Britain. The Saudi decision to refuse to allow the CAOC staff to be augmented with hundreds of extra staff to help run the Afghan war was a major blow to campaign planners, and the government in Riyadh also refused to allow key reconnaissance assets, such as Boeing RC-135 Rivet Joints and Lockheed U-2S Dragon Lady aircraft, to join the Afghan campaign from PSAB. They had to be based initially at Seeb in Oman for the first phase of the Afghan war before a more permanent base could be found at Al Dhafra in the UAE. The Saudis stuck to their hard-line position for the remainder of the year, including on one occasion refusing permission for a U-2 to divert to PSAB after Al Dhafra was closed because of bad weather. The U-2 crew were low on fuel and could not reach an alternative airfield so landed anyway, creating a major diplomatic incident with the Saudis.

The Qataris allowed the US to move into Al Udeid airbase to establish a base for Boeing KC-135R Stratotanker and McDonnell Douglas KC-10 Extender tanker aircraft, which were essential to allow bombers and strike aircraft to hit targets in Afghanistan from aircraft carriers or the giant airbase on the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia.

Diego Garcia was perhaps the most important piece of real estate after K2 in the US military build-up for Operation Enduring Freedom, and the UK government made it available days after 9/11. It became the home of Rockwell B-1B and Boeing B-52H Stratofortress heavy bombers and supporting Boeing KC-135 Stratotankers and McDonnell Douglas KC-10 Extender aerial refuelling aircraft that would provide the bulk of the airborne firepower for the war in Afghanistan.

US Marines of Battalion Landing Team 1/1, Bravo Company, 2nd Platoon, provide perimeter security at Jacobabad airbase in Pakistan during a Rapid Ground Refuelling of two US Navy HH-60 helicopters from a KC-130 on 9 November 2001. (USAF/TSgt Scott Reed)



Afghanistan's land-locked location and the relative lack of bases in neighbouring countries meant the fastest way to get tactical airpower into play was from US Navy aircraft carriers, positioned in the Northern Arabian Sea off Pakistan. The nuclear-powered carriers USS Enterprise, USS Carl Vinson and USS Theodore Roosevelt were ordered to make best speed for the war zone, with more than a 100 tactical combat aircraft. Ships and submarines of three carrier's battlegroups were equipped with hundreds of TLAMs that could also be thrown into the fight.

USAF Boeing E-3D Sentry AWACS aircraft were soon on their way to Thumrait airbase in Oman to provide crucial airspace monitoring and battle management support. Other reinforcements to the USAF presence in the Middle East included the first ever combat deployment of the Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle. Flying from Al Dhafra, along with the U-2s, the Global Hawks flew long-endurance missions over Afghanistan even though they were still in the experimental development stage. One was lost in a crash in the UAE desert while returning to base later in 2001.

The diversion of the US Navy aircraft carrier committed to Iraqi No Fly Zone support to the Arabian Sea to support the Afghan mission did lead the

Pentagon to beef up its presence in Kuwait to deter any Iraqi attempts to exploit the crisis. Additional USAF F-15E Strike Eagles of the 366th Wing were deployed to Al Jaber airbase in Kuwait and a battalion of US Army AH-64A Apache attack helicopters was also sent to the Gulf state. US Air National Guard Lockheed F-16C Fighting Falcons, equipped with the latest Litening targeting pods were later sent to Kuwait to augment the F-15Es.

US Navy commanders were also ordered to beef up their air patrols over Middle Eastern waters during the Afghan campaign to intercept any Al Qaeda operatives who might try to escape by sea and to prevent any attacks on civilian shipping. Additional US Navy P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft were sent to Bahrain, Masirah and Diego Garcia to patrol the region's seas. Masirah-based P-3Cs later flew overland surveillance missions into Afghanistan.

The British role in the campaign was still fluid at this point, even though Prime Minister Tony Blair had promised to 'stand shoulder to shoulder' with the US in the 'Global War on Terror'.

For several years, UK forces had been planning a major exercise, dubbed Saif Sareea II in Oman during September and October 2001, so when the Afghan crisis erupted the Royal Air Force was well positioned to participate in emerging operations. Senior RAF officers, led by Air Marshal Jock Stirrup, were sent to CENTOM in Tampa to integrate UK operations with their US counterparts. Other RAF officers were already working in senior positions in the CAOC in Saudi Arabia managing the British participation in no-fly zone patrols over Iraq, so the RAF was quick to be briefed and brought in on USAF plans for the Afghan campaign. Royal Navy officers based within the US Navy headquarters on Bahrain, helping to organize maritime trade sanctions against Iraq, quickly switched to working on options for using naval forces in the US campaign against Al Qaeda across the Middle East.

In Oman, the bulk of the RAF force participating in Saif Sareea II, including Tornado GR1 bombers, Tornado F3 fighters and Harrier GR7 ground attack jets, C-130 Hercules and E-3D Sentry aircraft, was concentrated at Thumrait airbase in the south of the country. Other support aircraft staged through Seeb, on Oman's northern coast. However, the US quickly let it be known that they did not want any British bombers or fighter

aircraft to join the campaign. They needed enablers – reconnaissance, air-to-air refueling, command and control aircraft – rather than bomb droppers.

RAF Vickers VC-10 and Lockheed Tristar air-to-air refuelling tankers based at Muharraq in Bahrain for no-fly zone duty were quickly switched to Afghan operations and were soon in high demand because they could refuel US Navy probe-equipped fighters to allow them to operate over Afghanistan from carriers in the Northern Arabian Sea. The British Tristars had the distinction of being the first coalition tanker asset to enter Afghanistan airspace, and in a period of just four months had dispensed more than 10,000 tons of fuel to coalition aircraft. One-fifth of US aircraft in ground attacks were refuelled by the RAF during the opening phase of the war in October and November. The RAF enhanced its Sentry detachment in Oman to allow a continuous orbit to be maintained over southern Afghanistan to control complex air operations by US and British aircraft.

Marines from Bravo Battery, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, arrive via helicopters at Jacobabad airbase in Pakistan to provide perimeter support and defence. The base came under regular small arms fire from disgruntled local Pakistanis during the opening weeks of the Afghan war. (USAF/TSgt Scott Reed)



Operation Oracle, as the UK mission was code-named, up to 26 October, led to the RAF Canberra PR9 unit, 39 Squadron, deploying to Seeb to fly photographic missions over Afghanistan. Seeb also played host to RAF Nimrod MR2 patrol aircraft and Nimrod R1 signals intelligence aircraft for the Afghan mission. The RAF Special Force Hercules unit, 47 Squadron, was already in Oman for Saif Sareea II and soon found itself working side by side with its US counterparts on Masirah.

The Royal Navy nuclear submarines, HMS Trafalgar and Triumph, were also on station in the Northern Arabian Sea with TLAMs by early October. HMS Trafalgar had been taking part in Saif Sareea II but HMS Triumph had redeployed from exercises off Iceland to arrive and re-arm with TLAMs ready to fire seventeen days later in the Arabian Sea.

British participation in ground operations inside Afghanistan was more problematical. The services of 22 Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment and the Special Boat Service (SBS) had been offered to the Americans within hours of the 9/11 attacks but until the US plans were firm, there was little the British could do but wait to be called into action. By early October, the outline of British special forces participation had emerged. The commanding officer of 22 SAS was in Oman working with Task Force Sword on Masirah and was pushing for his unit to be included in the raids being planned into southern Afghanistan. Mirroring the CIA strategy of sending liaison teams into Afghanistan, the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or MI6, with a small SAS protection team, was preparing to deploy a field team into the Panjshir Valley to work with the Northern Alliance and its station in Islamabad was beefed up with extra personnel to work with Pashtun tribes and try to track Al Qaeda activities in Pakistan.

Getting any British land component into Afghanistan was proving difficult to organize. Oman was unwilling to commit to providing Britain with bases while Saif Sareea II was underway and then was expected to place tight restrictions on the size of any UK land force contingent. Entry to Afghanistan through Uzbekistan or Tajikistan seemed problematical as the Americans had still not secured access to bases in the region.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the UK Ministry of Defence initially told Prime Minister Tony Blair that the UK might have to contribute a division-sized force of 25,000 troops if it wanted to play a major part in any corps-sized US intervention force. As it emerged that the US was not going

to send a large conventional land force to Afghanistan, then a different force package would be needed.

The UK government eventually settled on the idea of forming an amphibious task force to embark the SAS and other supporting units, including 40 Commando Royal Marines and the Boeing Chinook HC2 helicopters of 7 Squadron, the RAF Special Forces support unit. The aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious would be the command ship of the task group, with the amphibious ship HMS Fearless carrying much of the equipment needed to set up a forward special forces' support base in Afghanistan. While 40 Commando was in Oman participating in Saif Sareea II, the bulk of the SAS and SBS main force was back home in the UK and would only be moved forward when its mission was clearer.

Canada, Australia, Spain, Germany and France sent patrol aircraft to the region to support the enhanced maritime surveillance mission during late 2001, using bases in Djibouti, UAE and Qatar. Australia sent four F/A-18 Hornet fighters to Diego Garcia to provide close in protection of the USAF heavy bombers and tankers gathering at the base.

US air operations over Afghanistan began even before the full attack force was in place and the plan for Operation Enduring Freedom was complete.

CIA Predators began flying missions from Uzbekistan over Afghanistan only a few days after the attacks on New York and Washington. From the south, US Navy Grumman F-14 Tomcats from the USS Enterprise flew reconnaissance missions over southern Afghanistan in the last two weeks of September 2001, taking high level images of airfields, surface-to-air missile (SAM) and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) sites, army barracks and Al Qaeda camps. USAF Boeing RC-135 Rivet Joints and Lockheed U-2 Dragoon Lady spy planes, along with US Navy EP-3E Aries II, started flying along the Afghan – Pakistan border to 'hoover' up electronic signals intelligence on the enemy.

USAF Boeing E-3D Sentry AWACS aircraft set up round-the-clock orbits over Pakistan, protected by F-14 combat air patrols from the USS Enterprise and USS Carl Vinson, to co-ordinate this reconnaissance effort and monitor any air activity by the Afghan air force. A couple of Afghan MiG-21s took to the skies but they gave no indication that they had any idea of the US air presence over their country and the US combat controllers on the AWACS held back, ordering the F-14s to not intercept them.

As this reconnaissance effort was under way, planners at CENTCOM in Tampa and the CAOC in Saudi Arabia were putting the finishing touches to the first day's air attack plan for Operation Enduring Freedom. The opening phase of the attack would be a predominately air operation, centred on destroying Afghanistan's air force and air defences. For the airmen preparing their plans, this was a relatively straightforward exercise. While the distances involved were a challenge and a complex air-to-air refuelling plan was needed to ensure all the aircraft could get to their targets at the required times, few of the targets were camouflaged or hardened and all of Afghanistan's aircraft and SAMs dated from the 1980s. Afghanistan's conventional armed forces were a sitting duck.



US Marines of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) deployed off USS Bataan by CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter to enhance security at Jacobabad airbase in Pakistan. (US Navy/Chief Photographer's Mate Johnny Bivera)

A more difficult target set was the Al Qaeda network and the senior leadership of the Taliban regime. Although some Al Qaeda training camps

had been identified, the organization's leadership and most of its fighters lived in civilian houses and compounds spread around a country 251,772 squares miles in size, with a population in excess of 25 million.

To find these targets, General Franks turned to the R/MQ-1s of the USAF's 57th Wing and the CIA. These were sent to fly continuous orbits over known or suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban locations looking for any suspicious activity. Plans were developed for the Predators to be on station in large numbers during the first hours of Operation Enduring Freedom, ready to pick up any targets that might react to the first wave of air strikes. It was hoped that senior commanders would flee their compounds and be tracked by Predators, allowing strike aircraft and AGM-114 Hellfire missile-armed MQ-1s to be vectored to attack them. This new technique was known as time-sensitive-target (TST). As many of the potential targets were in heavily populated urban areas, the US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, demanded that rules of engagement be written tightly to ensure that senior officers in CENTCOM or in some cases his own office, or in some cases even President Bush, be involved in any decision to attack them. Predator video was distributed in real-time by satellite to CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, the Pentagon, the CIA's CTC and CIA teams inside Afghanistan, resulting in it being nicknamed 'Predator porn' or 'Rummy Television'. Rumsfeld reportedly had a monitor on his office desk to monitor the live video feed from Afghanistan.



An MH-53 helicopter is unloaded off a C-17 at Masirah Island off Oman as part of the build-up of Task Force Sword's aviation element. (DoD/SSgt Cecilio Ricardo)

Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban and Al Qaeda were also making preparations for the coming war, although their leaders clearly had a very different perception of how events would unfold. On the ground, Taliban troops on the front lines around Kabul and in northern Afghanistan remained active. South of Mazar-e-Sharif the Taliban launched a series of offensives to drive the Uzbek warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum back from the city. Calls were made in mosques and madrasas across southern Afghanistan and Pakistan for volunteers for the coming jihad or war with America. More troops were pushed in to the line on the Shomali Plain to the north of Kabul for an offensive against the Northern Alliance stronghold in the Panjshir Valley.

Within the Taliban senior leadership intense debates raged about how to react to the US ultimatum demanding they hand over Usama bin Laden. The Pakistani decision to side with the Americans caused some concern but when many of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency's advisors remained in Afghanistan rather than return home it created the impression that

Islamabad's change of heart was only a brief tactical move. The head of the ISI, Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed, travelled to Kandahar to deliver the US ultimatum personally to Mullah Omar and returned only with a promise that a two-day ulama or religious council would meet to agree the Taliban response. The Taliban decided to stick with Al Qaeda and reject the US demarche. On 4 October the Taliban made an offer to turn bin Laden over to Pakistan for trial in an international tribunal that operated according to Islamic sharia law. Three days later the Taliban offered to try bin Laden under sharia law if the US would present them with the evidence against the Al Qaeda chief. The Americans thought the Taliban were stalling.

No accounts of the meetings of the senior Taliban leadership have been made public but several analysts attribute the Taliban policy to the influence of bin Laden on Mullah Omar. The Al Qaeda assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud two days before 9/11 was said to have been part of a deal to bind the two fundamentalist Muslims together in the new phase of the jihad against what they termed 'godless unbelievers'. Bin Laden supposedly convinced Omar that any American retaliation for 9/11 would be limited to half-hearted and ineffectual cruise missile strikes, as it had been in the past.

The Taliban produced propaganda photos of a crashed US Predator drone on 22 September 2001. The drone came down in northern Afghanistan.





C-17 Globemaster IIIs were the biggest USAF transport aircraft that could land at K2 airbase in Uzbekistan and were instrumental in the delivery of large items of equipment, such as helicopters, that made the US Afghan campaign possible. (USAF/ Senior Airman Matthew Hannen)

If the Americans did manage to summon up the courage to send ground troops to Afghanistan, they would either find themselves fighting bloody urban battles similar to those in Somalia in 1993 or would cause so many civilian casualties that the Afghan people would unite behind the Taliban to fight the foreign invaders, in the same way as they did in the 1980s against the Soviet invasion.

The Taliban regime was bombarded with requests by the international media to enter Afghanistan but only representatives of organizations perceived as being 'friendly', such as the Qatar-based Al Jazeera satellite news network, were allowed to operate in Kabul. The Taliban embassy in Islamabad became the mouthpiece of the regime to the outside world and was besieged by television crews and the Taliban ambassador, Abdul Salam Zaeef, became something of a global celebrity.

There are some indications that not all the Taliban were united behind Mullah Omar's hardline. The Taliban commander of its Kandahar corps, Mullah Osmani, travelled twice to Pakistan at the end of September and in the first days of October to meet with the CIA station chief, Bob Grenier, to discuss turning over bin Laden and overthrowing Mullah Omar. The Taliban commander refused to bite but it was a sign that he might have been tempted. Elsewhere in Afghanistan, Northern Alliance intelligence operatives and front-line commanders were reporting growing contacts with their Taliban counterparts who were expressing unease and suggesting they might switch sides. The Northern Alliance even managed to contact senior Taliban officials who were responsible for holding eight international aid workers, including two Americans, and they offered to secure their release in return for a substantial bribe.

While the cracks were appearing with no American bombs dropping on Afghanistan, no senior Taliban members were prepared to risk stepping out of line until they could see the way the war would end.

Chapter 6

Strategic Air Campaign

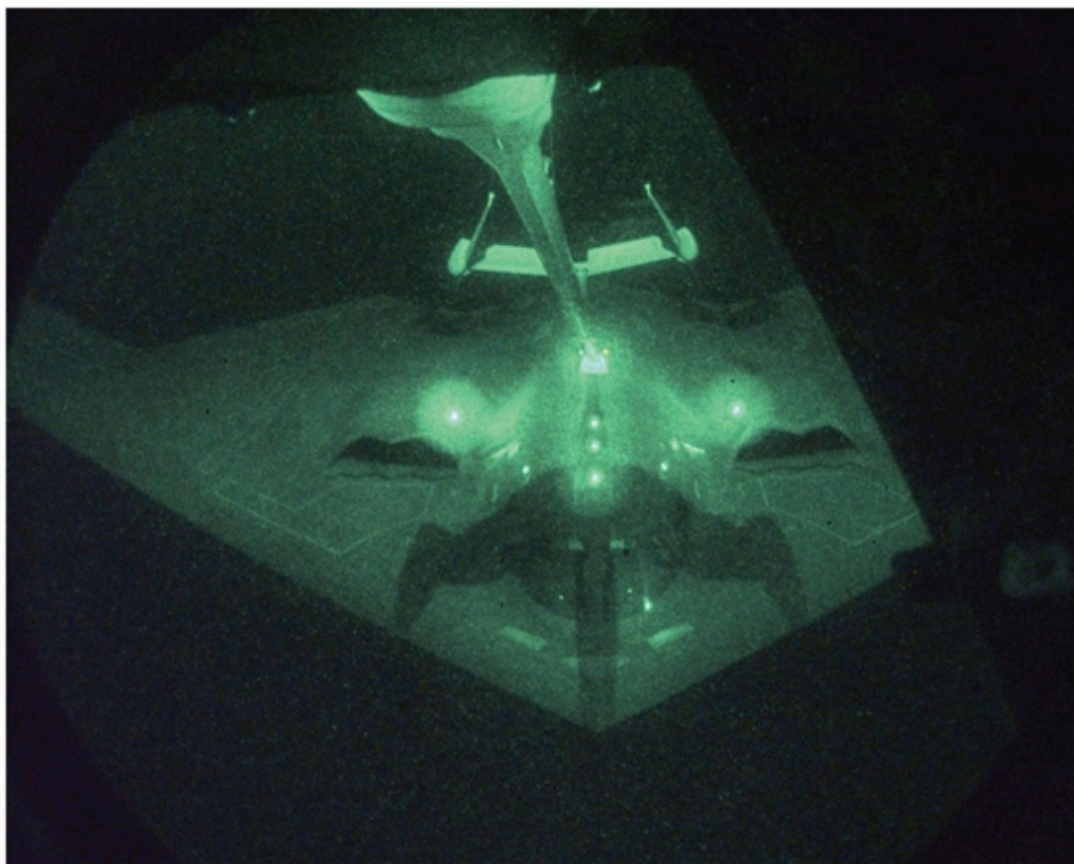
On the morning of 6 October, US President George Bush had given up on the Taliban ever handing over Usama bin Laden. He issued the formal orders for the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom, as the Afghan campaign would be code-named. There had been a last-minute dash to get combat search and rescue (CSAR) helicopters in place in Pakistan and Uzbekistan to provide rescue coverage in case any US aircraft were lost over Afghanistan. Pentagon chiefs set this as a key requirement before they would consider mounting the military campaign in Afghanistan.

Through late September, President Bush was pushing the Central Command chief General Tommy Franks to launch his air attack on Afghanistan. The first Sikorsky MH-60 Black Hawks and Boeing MH-47E Chinooks of the US Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) were operational in Uzbekistan and Pakistan by 6 October. US helicopters had been at Jacobabad in Pakistan for well over a week.

Operation Enduring Freedom was scheduled to kick off during the evening of 7 October with several packages of strike aircraft and Raytheon Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM) hitting some 31 separate targets, involving 275 individual weapon aim points, around Afghanistan, including airfields, radar sites, SAM batteries, Al Qaeda and Taliban command buildings and Al Qaeda training camps. The strikes were spread across Afghanistan, from Tora Bora on the eastern border with Pakistan to Herat out in the west.

A barrage of fifty TLAMs from the USS McFaul, USS John Paul Jones, USS O'Brien, USS Philippine Sea and two US and British nuclear submarines, HMS Triumph and Trafalgar, opened the attack on radar and

SA-3 SAM sites around Kabul, as well as several barrack buildings. Manned aircraft, including two Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, five B-1Bs and ten B-52s, as well as twenty-five US Navy tactical jets, then followed on behind. The B-2s flew all the way from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri to drop thirty-two Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs) but no details of their targets have been revealed by the US military, although the USAF says they were the first manned aircraft to enter Afghan air space.



USAF B-2 bombers opened the strategic air campaign against Afghanistan after multiple refuelings from KC-10A tanker aircraft that allowed the stealth aircraft to strike from their home base in Missouri. (USAF/SSgt Ken Bergmann)

A few minutes behind the TLAMs strike on Kabul was a package of Grumman F-14 Tomcats and McDonnell Douglas F/A-18C Hornets from the USS Carl Vinson. A Hornet fired a single AGM-84-ER Stand-off Land Attack Missiles to mount a precision strike on the remains of the Afghan air defence network around their capital. This was followed up by a laser-guided bomb attack by Tomcats, which also bombed a barrack complex. The US Navy jets then turned south to provide top cover for a pair of US B-1Bs that were hitting Al Qaeda targets around Jalabad with dozens of 2,000-lb JDAMs. Nearby, ten B-52s were launching a wave of attacks on targets around the Tora Bora mountain range, which was believed to be home to several Al Qaeda bases. The USS Enterprise launched a follow-up strike on the Kabul air defences later in the night.

Further south, Hornets from both the USS Enterprise and Carl Vinson pounded the airfield south of Kandahar city, hitting aircraft, SAMs and radars. Nearby, a pair of Tomcats from the USS Enterprise was tasked to hit a suspected Al Qaeda cave complex with laser-guided GBU-24 Paveway III penetrator bombs.

The long range of the Tomcats meant they were selected to join a strike by B-1Bs on Herat airbase, near the Iranian border. Several MiG-21s were destroyed on the ground in the raid. Once the heavy bombers turned for home, the F-14s dropped laser-guided bombs on a Taliban communications site at Farah.

All the targets were being monitored in real-time by Predators and the video fed back to CENTCOM, the CAOC, the Counter Terrorism Centre at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and the Pentagon. During the first wave of strikes, a group of suspected Taliban leaders were monitored leaving a compound in Kandahar and driving off in a convoy of six vehicles. CIA Director, George Tenet, telephoned Franks to stress that he believed the Taliban leader Mullah Omar was in one of the vehicles. The Predator beamed the video imagery back to General Franks's headquarters and senior staff officers frantically tried to get rules of engagement (ROE) clearance to attack and move a pair of US Navy Hornets into position to join the engagement. This took a long time, particularly after it seemed as if the targets entered a building believed to be a mosque. The attack was eventually authorized by President Bush but by the time the Hornets dropped their laser-guided bombs, several of the targets had left the building and

driven off in their vehicles. It was an early lesson in the complexity of Time Sensitive Targets (TST) for General Franks and his team, as well as USAF commanders and staff in the CAOC.

The whole opening attack was choreographed by controllers on the AWACS and extensive tanker support, orbiting over Pakistan and the Northern Arabian Sea, ensured that all the aircraft could reach their targets on time and return safely to base. USAF Boeing KC-135Rs Stratotankers and McDonnell Douglas KC-10A Extenders were heavily involved in these operations, along with two RAF Lockheed Tristars of 216 Squadron and four Vickers VC-10s of 10 and 101 Squadrons.

The resistance to the strikes had been limited to heavy AAA fire but US pilots reported that it was largely undirected and none of it came near to any American aircraft. The Afghan air force and SAM batteries seemed to have been caught largely by surprise and made no serious attempt to fight back. No electronic emissions were detected by US and British spy planes monitoring Afghan airspace during the opening attack, suggesting that the Taliban's air defence network was not working. While the US pilots equipped with targeting pods reported very accurate hits, intelligence experts in the CAOC and CIA were less certain about the level of damage the strikes had caused. Senior air force officers said more attacks were needed to make sure that the required level of damage was achieved. No chances should be taken in the drive to win air supremacy.



A Tomahawk cruise missile is launched from the USS Philippine Sea (CG 58) in a strike against Al Qaeda training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. (US Navy/Master Chief Petty Officer Terry Cosgrove)

On the ground in the Panjshir Valley, the CIA's Jawbreaker team and Northern Alliance commanders were even less impressed. Not a single US bomb had been dropped on any front-line Taliban positions, despite the detailed targeting maps of them that had been dispatched to the CTC and CENTCOM. It emerged that the target set for the first night of the war had been highly restricted by the National Security Council in Washington and CENTCOM. The Pakistanis and other governments had lobbied the Americans that a rapid Taliban military collapse would lead to a 'bloodbath' in Kabul. CENTCOM wanted to weaken the Taliban military infrastructure first before unleashing its air power on their front-line positions. Also, the CIA's targeting data was not considered to meet CENTCOM's strict collateral damage requirements because they could not provide positive information about the presence of civilians. The leader of the Jawbreaker team, CIA veteran Gary Schroen, telephoned CTC to complain to his superiors that the raids would have minimal impact on the Taliban military machine, which was not dependent on any of the targets that had been attacked.

British Tomahawk cruise missile fired from Royal Navy submarines also joined the opening attack on Afghanistan. (Raytheon)





B-1 Lancer bombers were an important element of the first package of manned aircraft to penetrate Afghan airspace. (USAF/SrA Rebeca M. Luquin)

The next night another wave of US aircraft was launched to attack thirteen new targets, which were similar to those attacked on the previous day. Indeed, some were re-strikes of the same targets. The first two days of bomb damage assessment (BDA) suggested that eleven out of twelve Afghan SA-3 radars had been destroyed and seven out of eight airfields put of action. Half of the long-range radars had been destroyed, as well as three radio towers and scores of barracks, training camps and cave complexes. Senior USAF commanders said they had degraded the Afghan air defences enough for the US to begin daylight air operations on 9 October. However, pilots who flew on the first attack waves reported no activity by the Afghan air defences, even before the first bombs of the campaign were dropped. This led them to suspect that the Afghan air defence network was in fact inoperable. A senior officer involved in planning these attacks later agreed that the experience of Iraq and Kosovo had coloured US and British assessments of the strength of

the Afghan defences. 'We thought it was better to be cautious,' he recalled. 'But in the end we just pounded sand for far too long.'

By the end of the first week of air operations, US strike power in theatre was increased by the arrival of the USS Theodore Roosevelt and its air wing to allow the USS Enterprise to start its delayed voyage home. USAF Lockheed AC-130U Spectre gunships also joined the fight on 15 October.

President Bush was very keen to stress that the US military campaign was aimed at the Taliban military and Al Qaeda, rather than the Afghan people, so he ordered that nightly humanitarian aid drops be made by USAF Boeing C-17 Globemaster strategic transport aircraft. These were made from Ramstein airbase in Germany and involved multiple in-flight refuellings to reach their drop zones in Afghanistan. The transport aircraft were escorted in Afghan airspace by F-14s and apart from one occasion, when the fighters could not link up with two C-17s and the transports had to turn back without dropping their cargoes, the nightly drops continued throughout October and into November.

This set the scene for the second week's air operations with an increasing target set of Afghan ground forces and Al Qaeda targets being attacked around Kandahar and Kabul by a mix of USAF heavy bombers and US Navy tactical jets. The B-2s were used only occasionally, flying a total of six missions from Whiteman, via Diego Garcia, dropping some sixty-four munitions, including GBU-37 satellite-guided penetrator weapons on what the Pentagon called an 'underground leadership target'. In the first five days of the air campaign the B-1Bs and B-52s dropped 500 JDAMs, 1,000 Mk 82 unguided bombs and 50 CBU-87 cluster bombs. While in the same period the US Navy Hornets and Tomcats dropped 240 JDAMs, and 1,000-lb and 2,000-lb laser-guided bombs. The US and Royal Navy ships and submarines fired some 88 Tomahawk cruise missiles up to 15 October. The exact number fired by the HMS Trafalgar and Triumph is still classified secret because it might reveal the actual size of the UK's small inventory of the cruise missiles but it is known they launched missiles on 7, 8 and 13 October.

This relatively modest amount of weaponry dropped illustrated the lack of large fixed targets in Afghanistan and the difficulty finding the elusive and fleeting high-value targets linked to the leadership of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. There was some tension between the aircrew, intelligence analysts

and senior commanders over the CENTCOM's BDA criteria. The pilots who could look at the targets on the ground with the targeting pods reported that Afghan's air force and air defence was inoperable but intelligence analysts wanted still photographs of every blown up plane and missile battery before they would declare a kill. After a couple of days the aircrew said they were just pounding rubble.

The next two weeks the desultory strategic bombing campaign continued as the so-called 'Pashtun-lobby' of the CIA appeared to hold sway in Washington. The CIA station in Pakistan was euphoric that President Musharraf had sacked the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency chief, Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed, and several of his hardline senior pro-Taliban senior officers. The 'Pashtun lobby' said this was evidence that their strategy was working and moderate forces were on the rise in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

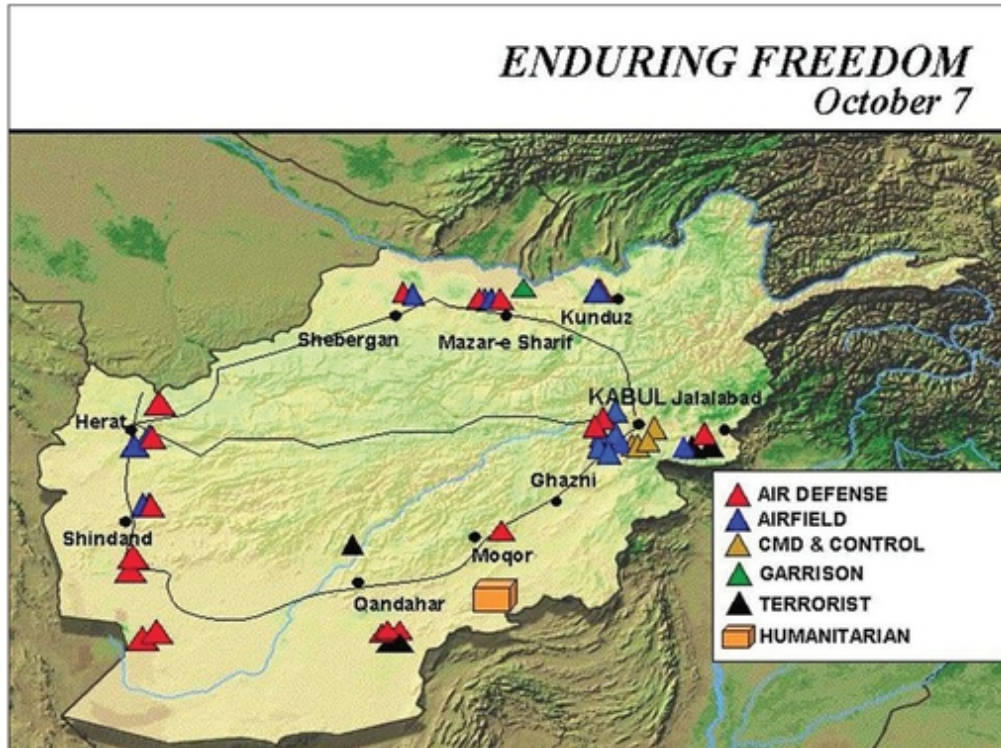
The USAF and US Navy were only flying fewer than 100 missions a day over Afghanistan and attacking between ten and twenty fixed targets a day. This was hardly an overwhelming air offensive. The National Security Council continued to be wary of unleashing the Northern Alliance before any counter-weight from the Pashtun tribes had emerged. With none of its own people on the ground to find targets or assess the tactical situation for themselves, the US military could only go along with the CIA's assessment.

This was also a very new type of war in a new theatre of operations and the senior players on the US side and their headquarters staff were still trying to get up to speed. The CTC and CENTCOM staff were still absorbing hundreds of new staff to man their expanded operations rooms and intelligence analysis organizations. Many of these people had very little first-hand knowledge of Afghanistan or the surrounding region. The handful of CIA operatives on the ground in the Panjshir Valley complained that there appeared to be very little understanding or appreciation of their on-the-scene reports. While in the CENTCOM military staff, there was an equal struggle to get on top of events. There was little understanding or confidence in the CIA GPS target data from the Shomali Plain because they did not come from trained and qualified military forward air controllers and could not with 100 per cent accuracy confirm that no civilians were near them to meet the rules of engagement (ROE) collateral damage requirements. The CIA operatives on the ground also claimed that CENTCOM planners at this stage in the war

were still thinking in conventional military terms and classified rear area supply dumps, military barracks, air defences and airbases were high-value targets that were essential to the Taliban. They repeatedly pushed the case that the priority target should be the Taliban and Al Qaeda frontline positions. These were stuffed full of hundreds of Taliban and Arab fighters, who the Kandahar regime depended on to retain their grip on power. More importantly, they said the US bombing tactics were counterproductive. They were giving the Taliban the impression that the Americans were not willing to fight and were just repeating their failed strategy of using cruise missiles to strike symbolic targets with no military value. Every time a B-52 overflew the Taliban front lines and did not drop any bombs it actually raised their morale, while at the same time this undermined the morale of the Northern Alliance commanders and soldiers, who were beginning to openly question the American promises of support.

Ground crew members wave at a B-52H Stratofortress bomber as it taxis for take-off from Diego Garcia on the first strike mission against targets in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. (USAF/Senior Airman Rebeca M. Luquin)





The Pentagon briefing map used to describe the first day of the air campaign. (DoD)

For the senior commander and staffs in CENTCOM and the CTC, the high-level political interest in Washington in what they were doing was intense. There was little hard information coming out of Afghanistan and it was intensely scrutinised. According to CENTCOM veterans, this created an atmosphere verging on ‘micro-management’ as top-level leadership across the US government tried to influence what was going on without really having an understanding of the real situation on the ground.

The air of unreality in the US military was not restricted to CENTCOM. The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) operation on Masirah Island off the coast of Oman, known as Task Force Sword, was in the throes of preparing two raids into southern Afghanistan. Major General Dell Dailey came up with the idea of raiding the targets that had been identified by intelligence as being linked to Mullah Omar and Al Qaeda. A huge amount of time and effort was put into planning and preparing the raids but several of the participants began to wonder about the validity of this intelligence as

its age and accuracy seemed to be in doubt. Kandahar was viewed by Dailey's intelligence staff as a 'Taliban fortress' that was ringed with strong anti-aircraft defences and hundreds of tanks, but many of his troops were uncertain about how much this equipment actually worked. Once the planning was underway, Dailey was not going to stop it. He wanted to video one of the raids and release the imagery to the media to undermine the morale of Taliban and Al Qaeda. At this point in the campaign, the 5th Special Forces Group had not got any of its ODA teams into Afghanistan so Dailey's raid seemed to be the best chance of getting US troops into action, further making it unlikely it would be cancelled.

A Pentagon post strike image of damage to Kabul International Airport. This is imagery from a U-2 Dragon Lady spy plane. (DoD)



Task Force Sword contained the Pentagon's most highly trained and best equipped commando units. Often described as 'tier one' or 'black ops', these units – Delta Force, SEAL Team 6, and their supporting intelligence units,

including the Advance Force Operations unit, as well as covert entry helicopters from the 160th SOAR – were quickly deployed to Masirah Island off Oman in the days after 9/11. A US Army Ranger battalion was attached to provide additional boots on the ground. Their reputation as America's most elite fighting force was both a help and hindrance. While they had access to an almost unlimited budget, the best equipment and superb training, the Pentagon and White House expected great things of them.

The head of Task Force Sword, General Dailey, would soon become one of the most controversial figures of the opening phase of the Afghan campaign. His task force had the mission of conducting any direct action to kill or capture senior leaders of Al Qaeda. He personally briefed President Bush on 21 September on his special mission unit's proposed operation straight after General Franks had briefed on his war plan for the whole campaign. As well as setting up his 'kill and capture unit' on Masirah, Dailey deployed liaison teams into the big American base at Jacobabad in Pakistan and set up a small quick force at the base to respond to short-notice missions. A couple of Dailey's people were posted to Task Force Dagger in Uzbekistan to co-ordinate any action by Task Force Sword in the north of Afghanistan and a three-person team was sent with the CIA into the Panjshir Valley, outside Kabul. Their primary job was to pick up any information that might allow a rescue mission to be launched for the eight international aid workers from the Shelter Now International (SNI) charity being held in Kabul by the Taliban.

The first phase of offensive land operations of the war got under way in the early hours of 20 October with a raid by US Army Rangers on a suspected Taliban-held compound and airstrip, dubbed Objective Rhino, in the deserts of Helmand province, to the south-west of Kandahar city. An Afghan resistance fighter was recruited by the CIA to walk across the desert and plant a transponder at the location to help guide US troops to their target.



The remains of an Afghan S-75 Dvina (SA-2 Guideline) surface-to-air missile after a US air strike. (DoD)

Some 200 Rangers parachuted into the desert and then assaulted the compound, with fire support from a Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit stealth bomber and Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunships, before securing the airstrip to allow two Lockheed MC-130s Combat Talons to return and recover them back to Masirah. This operation apparently went well, with eleven enemy fighters being killed and a haul of intelligence documents being captured. At the same time as the assault on Objective Rhino, a contingent of the elite Delta Force was being flown towards Kandahar in Boeing MH-47E helicopters to assault a compound where the Taliban leader Mullah Omar was suspected to be hiding. Task Force Gecko's helicopters landed successfully but the assault force met some resistance as they cleared their objectives and several were injured. When the helicopters were extracting the Delta Force operators, one of the pilots flying on night vision goggles misjudged his take-off and struck the roof of a nearby building, ripping off part of his rear undercarriage. The helicopter kept flying and made it safely to Jacobabad in Pakistan for repair. Elsewhere in Pakistan other US aviators

were not so lucky. A Ranger reaction force had been positioned at a forward airstrip at Dalbandin, a stone's throw from the Afghan border, but one of its MH-60K helicopters was caught in a 'brown out' and rolled over, killing two Rangers and injuring several others.

When the video footage of the raid on Objective Rhino was shown at a Pentagon briefing the following day it was lapped up by the world's press. On 5 November this bubble burst when the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published an article claiming the targets were empty when the attacks took place and no intelligence of any value was collected. On Masirah Island the value of the raids was being questioned even before Hersh's article appeared because many of the special forces operatives feared that, rather than undermining Taliban and Al Qaeda morale, the raid had only alerted the enemy that the US was coming for them. Many of the Taliban leaders in Kandahar reportedly now began making preparations to flee to Pakistan or to their tribal villages. Yet, Task Force Sword had not yet put any forces on the ground to intercept them or cut off escape routes. Morale nose-dived on Masirah when Dailey told his special forces operators that Washington wanted to wind up the mission and pull JSOC back to their home base in the US.

Destroyed Soviet-era aircraft lie near the runway at the Kandahar International Airport in Afghanistan. This aircraft was not a victim of US bombs but the presence of so many abandoned aircraft on Afghan airfields did confuse US intelligence analysts. (US Navy/Photographer's Mate 1st Class Ted Banks)



In the last week of October the British government formed up its land contribution to the Operation and it decided to activate contingency plans to embark a special force task force at sea to join Task Force Sword's raiding effort in southern Afghanistan.

On 26 October orders were received to convert the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious from being a strike carrier with Harrier jump jets embarked into a helicopter carrier (LPH – Landing Platform Helicopter). The new mission was code-named Operation Veritas and also wrapped up the UK's air participation in the Afghan campaign. The ship and several others were already off Oman after participating in the Saif Sareea II exercise, although this had been done before but never so far from home. It was also unusual for the ship to be fitted out for special forces operations, so all her embarked aircraft squadrons, stores and many of her crew had to be disembarked and replaced with a force of twin-rotor RAF Boeing Chinook HC2 helicopters plus a special forces communications and support equipment, as well as desert patrol vehicles. This was done within forty-eight hours during a short stay alongside in the Omani port of Salalah. The ship was supported by landing ship HMS Fearless, two escort warships, seven Royal Fleet Auxilliary supply ships and two nuclear submarines that were already operating in the Northern Arabian Sea. Royal Marines of 40 Commando

were embarked on HMS Illustrious and on HMS Fearless. The main special forces elements of the task groups were held back in the UK or ashore in Oman as the British waited to see how the campaign developed before committing their forces.

The British government was very keen to be seen to be contributing troops to Operation Enduring Freedom and steadily leaked a series of stories to the media hyping up the possible role of British forces. When it emerged that the Royal Marines of 40 Commando were being allowed a week of rest and recuperation in Oman after spending several weeks in the desert on the Saif Sareea exercise rather than immediately heading for the Afghan war zone, the UK Ministry of Defence arranged for the journalists who wrote the stories to be expelled from Oman.

The British got their first combat mission in just as Operation Veritas was being launched but it was kept very secret at the time. Troops of 22 Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment were given the mission by Task Force Sword to raid into western Afghanistan. A and G Squadrons of the 22 SAS were flown forward from their advance base at Thumrait in Oman to Dalbandin and another base in Pakistan on 24 October, before being flown into north-west Afghanistan by USAF MC-130 Hercules to carry out vehicle-borne search and destroy missions in a desert region to the east of Herat for two weeks. The force was extracted back to the UK by 8 November after seeing no action.

In this febrile atmosphere in Washington during the third and fourth week of October, the validity of the US strategy was increasingly being questioned. Armchair media pundits and retired generals were saying America was locked in a Vietnam-style 'quagmire'. Even the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency circulated a report critical of the CIA's Afghan strategy. It predicted that the Northern Alliance would not be able to take Mazar-e-Sharif and that there was no prospect of the Pashtun tribes rising in revolt against the Taliban. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, USAF General Richard Myers, was pushing for a ramping up of the bombing effort. The big fear was that the harsh Afghan winter would arrive before the Americans had begun their ground offensive, effectively freezing the war until the spring of 2002. President Bush and other senior political leaders were starting to become very frustrated. Vice President Dick Cheney has been described as a 'brooding presence' at meetings in Washington at this

time, openly worrying about where the next Al Qaeda terrorist attack would come and how another mass casualty event could be dealt with. Afghanistan needed to be cleared of bin Laden and his organization very quickly to neutralize the threat, said Cheney. The Northern Alliance increasingly looked like the only game in town and the ground was shifting to open the way for the bombing of front-line positions. Events in southern Afghanistan soon tipped the National Security Council to change its plans and opened the way for the Northern Alliance to attack.

An F/A-18C Hornet is prepared for launch from the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson as part of the first day of strikes against Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. (DoD/Petty Officer 1st Class Greg Messier)



An Afghan child sits amid Humanitarian Daily Rations (HDRs) delivered by C-17 aircraft. Some 2,004,440 HDRs were dropped on Afghanistan in the first two months of Operation Enduring Freedom. (USAF)



Operations in the south had long been hampered by the lack of an anti-Taliban organization such as the Northern Alliance. The first opportunity to mobilize support among Pashtun tribes came to nothing on 26 October when the anti-Taliban leader Abdul Haq was cornered by his enemies in southern Afghanistan. He had entered eastern Afghanistan, near Jalalabdad, with only twenty armed supporters and no CIA liaison officers or special forces teams for protection. The CIA claimed he had made his move without their approval. Haq called one of his supporters in the US on his satellite phone and desperately asked for American help to rescue him. A call was eventually put through to the CIA's CTC and a missile-armed Predator drone

was diverted to help Haq. It was able to destroy two Taliban pick-up trucks but Haq was eventually captured and shot by a firing squad and his small band of supporters were hanged by the Taliban.

Within days, General Franks was on his way to Uzbekistan to unleash the Northern Alliance.

Chapter 7

Northern Alliance Attacks

As the US strategic air campaign continued to grind on with little apparent impact on the Taliban, US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief, General Tommy Franks, and his special operations commanders were under intense pressure to get ‘boots on the ground’ in the Central Asian country to start a land offensive against the Taliban army. President George Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Franks were all keen to get things moving and take the war to the enemy because the northern route seemed to be the only way into Afghanistan at this stage in the war.

US Army helicopters arrived at K2 just in time to stand up to a CSAR alert force for the start of the US strategic air campaign on 7 October. For the next week, logistic delays and bad weather played havoc with attempts by Task Force Dagger’s commanders to move their troops into Afghanistan. The task force commander, Colonel John Mulholland, had to juggle the incessant demands of his superiors to get his teams into Afghanistan with the realities on the ground. The proliferation of video conferencing technology, satellite telephones and emails meant Rumsfeld and other senior US government leaders could directly make their views felt to military officers in the field in a way that was impossible in previous conflicts. Mulholland was determined to be sure that the landing zones for his teams were secured by loyal Afghans before he dispatched them across the border. This led to some tension with both CENTCOM and Washington but it won him the respect of his troops preparing to deploy to exposed positions in Afghanistan.

US Army Special Force Operational Detachment Alphas (ODA) and helicopter crews began planning their first mission from K2 on 14 October

when bad weather closed down air operations. This was a complex business because US Army Special Operations Chinooks and MH-60L DAPs, which were the only helicopters in the US inventory that had the power to operate over the 10,000-plus-foot high mountains in northern Afghanistan, had to refuel in mid-air and this could not be done in cloud or very high winds.



MH-47 Chinook helicopters of the US Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment were the first US helicopters to enter Afghan airspace to insert special forces teams. (USAF/Airman Matthew R. Loken)

The helicopters also had to be stripped down to reduce weight to improve performance and even then could only carry less than half their normal complement of forty fully loaded troops.

The orders to go were given on 16 October but again the weather meant it was not until the evening of 19 October that a MH-47E, escorted by two DAPs, took off from K2 to deliver ODA 595 into the Dari-a-Souf valley north of Mazar-e-Sharif to link up with the forces of warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum. The helicopters had to be refuelled in mid-air to reach their

objective. As soon as they entered Afghan air space they were engulfed in a sandstorm that almost forced them to turn back. The crews pressed on and the Chinook landed to unload its passengers, while the heavily armed and armoured DAPs circled the landing zone. The next day the Special Forces forward air controllers (FACs) were on the front line directing a Boeing B-52 Stratofortress to strike at a single Taliban bunker near Mazar-e-Sharif.

Later on 20 October, USAF Sikorsky MH-53Js flying from Jacobabad in Pakistan delivered ODA 555, also known as the Triple Nickel, to the Panjshir Valley, north of Kabul. Bad weather in northern Afghanistan hampered their insertion, so the special forces soldiers were flown 'over the weather' in a MC-130 and shuttled down from K2 to Pakistan. Then the USAF Special Operations aviators in Pakistan flew them northward. Within hours of landing the soldiers soon made their way down towards the battle lines on the Shomali Plain near Bagram. This was the gateway to the Afghan capital, Kabul, only some twenty-five miles to the south.

Over the next two weeks, more teams were inserted by MH-47E into the Northern Alliance territory from K2 to increase the pressure on the Taliban. ODA 585 was landed into the Callocutta region near Kunduz on 23 October and ODA 534 was inserted to link with Dostum's rival General Atta Mohammed's forces in the Dari-e-Balkh Valley on 3 November. To increase the capacity of the helicopter force at K2, the US military began co-ordinating its airlift operations into Afghanistan with those of the CIA. Although the number of MH-47Es and HC-130Ps at K2 had been increased, the ranges involved flying into Afghanistan and the need for air-to-air refuelling meant there was limited capacity to move troops into the country and to re-supply them or evacuate casualties. Shuttles were set up with MH-47Es making the initial flight into Afghanistan and then they would transfer their passengers and cargo into CIA Mi-17s for the onward journey to the centre of the country. ODA 553 took this route into Bamyian province on 2 November and on 8 November ODA 586 and 594 were shuttled to Kunduz and Panjshir Valley respectively.

A British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) team and a small protection team of 22 Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment soldiers were inserted into Panjshir in mid-October to re-establish links with Fahim's forces and open political dialogue between London and the Northern Alliance.

While the American build-up of CIA and US Army special forces FAC teams gained momentum, the debates in CENTCOM and Washington raged about how to choreograph the coming land war. Events on the ground would soon expose much of these debates as little more than wishful thinking.

The arrival of ODA 595 with Dostum's forces proved a major turning point and within hours of their arrival the aggressive Uzbek warlord had taken them to the front line to demonstrate their ability to call in close air support. Suitably impressed by the ability of the US soldiers to call down bombs from the sky, he declared that he would attack the Taliban the next day, even though his men only had fewer than 100 rounds each for their small arms and few heavy weapons. Unlike on the Shomali Plain near Kabul, the front lines around Mazar-e-Sharif were not dominated by long trench lines and Dostum's men were able to manoeuvre across the terrain in their handful of tanks, trucks and on horse back. In a series of raids that entered the folklore of the Afghan war, ODA 594 and a small number of CIA operatives joined Dostum's men in a series of cavalry charges against Taliban outposts. The first raid on 23 October almost ended in disaster when a supporting US bomber had to return to base after it ran out of bombs. Not daunted by the heavy casualties, Dostum and his men repeated the attack the next day. This time the Special Force team had co-ordinated the presence overhead of a stream of US fighters and the Uzbek fighters were able to press home their cavalry under a continuous wave of US bombing that knocked out the Taliban's tanks, artillery and machine guns.

US Army Special Forces and CIA Liaison in Afghanistan, October to December 2001

Task Force Dagger		Insertion Date	US Commander	Local Commander	Radio Call Sign
ODA	Location				
595	Dari-a-Souf valley	19/10/2001	Captain Mitch Nelson	General Abdul Rashid Dostum	Tiger 02
555	Panjshir Valley	20/10/2001	CWO David Diaz	General Fahim	Tiger 01
534	Dari-e-Balkh Valley	03/11/2001	Captain Dean Nosorog	General Atta Mohammed	Tiger 04
586	south Kunduz	08/11/2001	Captain Patrick O'Hara	Commander Daoud	Texas 11
585	north Kunduz	25/10/2001	MSgt John Bolduc	General Bariullah	Tiger 03
594	Panjshir Valley	08/11/2001	Captain Glenn Thomas	General Bismullah Khan	Texas 14
553	Bamyian	02/11/2001		Dr Karim Khalili	Tiger 07
554	Herat	11/11/2001	Capt Carl	Ismail Khan	Tiger 08
574	Uruzgan	14/01/2001	Captain Jason Amerine	Hamid Karzai	Texas 12
583	Spin Boldak	19/11/2001	Captain Smith	Gul Agha Sherzai	Texas 17
572	Tora Bora	04/12/2001	CW3 Dwayne Torgensen	Hazrat Ali	
532	Kabul	26/11/2001	Captain Mitchel Rezabeck	General Said Jaffar Naderi	Cobra 22

CIA Liaison Team		Commander
Designation	Location	
Jawbreaker	Shomali Plain/Kabul	Gary Schroen/Gary Berntsen
Alpha	Mazar-e-Sharif	General Fahim/Commander Daoud
Delta	Bamyian	General Abdul Rashid Dostum
Echo	Kandahar/Pakistan	Dr Karim Khalili
Juliet	Eastern Afghanistan	Hamid Karzai/Gul Agha Sherzai
??	Herat	Ismail Khan

For the next week, the US FAC teams roamed the hillsides outside Mazar-e-Sharif with Dostum's men guiding bombing raids onto Taliban positions. This was not the overwhelming offensive that the CIA operatives were requesting be directed against the Taliban but it was a start. The FACs began

to use thermal sights, global positioning systems, and laser-range finders to pin-point Taliban positions. They then transmitted the co-ordinates via laptop computers to the Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) command post at K2 and by radio to US attack aircraft orbiting over these battlefields. Targets were being hit within a few minutes of being detected by US FAC teams. They concentrated on Taliban command posts detected by their portable signals intelligence-monitoring equipment, as well as tanks, artillery pieces and forward supply dumps. Concentrating on hitting Taliban field commanders and their prestige weapons systems meant the morale of the Taliban units began to crumble under the weight of precision attacks. They had never faced such ‘surgical’ attack and they had a disproportionate impact. It was only a matter of time before the Taliban units in key sections of the battlefield began to crack.

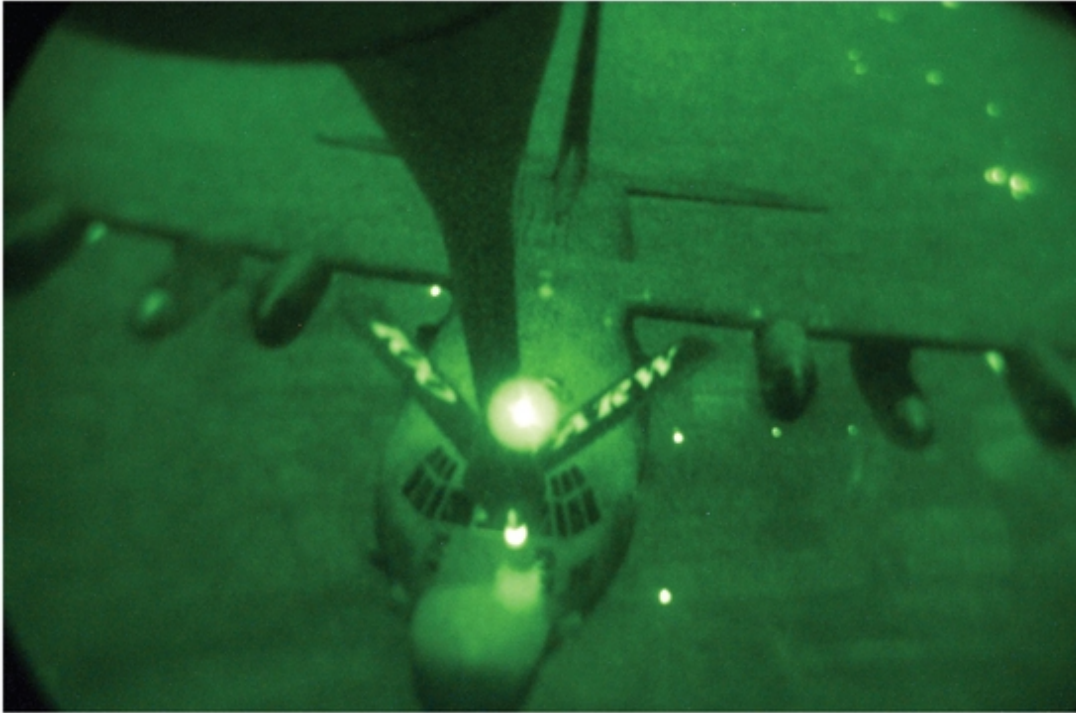
US air strikes on barracks and other fixed positions around Mazar-e-Sharif in the opening weeks of Operation Enduring Freedom had little impact on front-line Taliban positions. (DoD)



In the last week of October and into November, the US FAC teams were now operating on all the active front lines facing Taliban troops defending Kunduz and Talaqan, Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat and Bagram. At the same time, the US Logistic Task Force was starting to get up to speed and nightly airdrops of arms, ammunition, food, blankets, uniforms, boots and money were being made by MC-130s, flying from Turkey, into Northern Alliance territory.

Iconic images of US Army Special Forces troops on horseback with Northern Alliance fighters loyal to Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum during the build up to the attack on Mazar-e-Sharif. (US Army)





An MC 130 Combat Shadow aircraft is refuelled from a KC 135R Stratotanker en route to parachuting weapons and other equipment to Northern Alliance fighters. (USAF/MSgt. Blake R. Borsic)

On the ground, the CIA liaison officers and US special forces teams found themselves having to ‘manage’ the disparate parts of the Northern Alliance. There was considerable tension between Dostun’s Uzbeks and the Tajiks of Generals Qasim Fahim and Atta Mohammed. They were unhappy when they found out that the US was providing arms and money to their rivals and were not keen to co-ordinate operations. It took a considerable amount of patient negotiation to paper over these cracks. In the end, the payment of even more money to the rival leaders and promises of even more aid usually resolved the situation.

When the reports of the cavalry charges from the ODA commander with Dostum made their way back to President Bush in Washington they had a significant effect. At last there was someone who was attacking and defeating the Taliban. The decision was taken in the last week of October to unleash the Northern Alliance against the Taliban troops defending Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz. The policy of bombing strategic targets – vehicle parks,

barracks, air defence and airbases – was dropped in favour of concentrating on Taliban front-line positions.

On 30 October, General Franks flew to Dusanbe airport to meet with the senior leadership of the Northern Alliance to tie down details of a co-ordinated offensive across northern Afghanistan. General Fahim flew down from the Panjshir Valley for the meeting in the rear cargo cabin of the Franks' Boeing C-17 Globemaster III aircraft, which had been converted into a flying command post for the CENTCOM chief.

Fahim pushed for the offensive to start with a drive on Kabul from the Panjshir Valley but Franks held firm to the line that the Northern Alliance should not enter the Afghan capital ahead of a new government of national unity being formed with the help of a United Nations peacekeeping force. The promise of a payment of \$5 million a month to fund the Northern Alliance army soon won Fahim around. Two commanders soon got down to making detailed plans. US air power would be concentrated on Taliban front lines around Mazar-e-Sharif and Talaqan. Once breakthroughs had been achieved the Northern Alliance units would move quickly to trap the 20,000 Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in the north into pockets and cut them off from Kabul. The main offensive against the Shomali Plain would then be launched but Franks estimated that this would not be until December.

Horses were an essential means of transport in northern Afghanistan and the US troops requested airdrops of saddles and fodder to keep the horses of their Northern Alliance allies fit. (US Army)



General Tommy Franks, Commander US Central Command, visited Uzbekistan in late October 2001 to cement the alliance of US, Uzbek and Tajik forces. (Tim Ripley)



Back in Washington, the US military was hedging its bets and orders were issued in the last week of October to the 18th Airborne Corps to start planning for a massed parachute landing to the south of Kabul to cut off the Taliban forces in the Afghan capital. At the same time, the US Marine Corps was ordered to begin preparing to launch helicopter raids into southern Afghanistan from ships off the Pakistani coast.

In preparation for the new battles, US airmen had also changed the way they operated. CAOC planners had begun to divide the terrain over the

battlefields of northern Afghanistan into so-called 'kill boxes' and they then started to assign US Navy F-14 Tomcats with airborne-forward air controller (A-FAC) qualified crews to patrol each one to rapidly direct follow-up waves of aircraft on to their targets. During night-time, the AC-130s would take over the job of patrolling the kill boxes over the battle lines, ensuring the air onslaught on the Taliban was relentless.

A B-52 Stratofortress from the 40th Air Expeditionary Wing moves in to refuel from a KC-10 Extender, from the 60th Air Expeditionary Group, on its way back to Diego Garcia after a successful bombing mission over northern Afghanistan on 30 October 2001. (USAF/TSgt Cedric H. Rudisill)





The movement of US Army Special Forces teams in Afghanistan during late October and November 2001. (US Army)



A BLU-82 Daisy Cutter being prepared for deployment to Afghanistan. The 15,000-lb fuel air explosive bombs were the most powerful bombs in the US arsenal short of nuclear weapons. (USAF)

K2 airbase was constantly being reinforced as the US ramped up its effort to defeat the Taliban. The USAF 16th and 352nd Special Operations Wings (SOWs) deployed significant forces to the base, including Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon airlifters and Lockheed AC-130U Spectre gunships. The main task of the MC-130s was to parachute drop supplies to the ODAs, shuttles to the US base at Jacobabad in Pakistan, and tactical air landing operations on rough airstrips and humanitarian aid to civilians. They also brought with them several BLU-82 15,000-lb 'Daisy Cutter' fuel air explosive bombs. These were the most powerful explosives in the US arsenal, short of nuclear weapons. Two of these bombs would be used to open the door to Mazar-e-Sharif.

US Army officers and CIA operatives brokered a deal between Dostum and Atta to launch a joint, two-pronged attack. Dostum's forces would

advance from the west up the Darya Suf river valley and Atta's men would drive over open land to the east and meet up on the northern outskirts of Mazar-e-Sharif. The attack opened on 5 November with the dropping of two BLU-82s on Taliban positions around the village of Aq Kuprok. Hundreds of Taliban fighters were killed and wounded in the enormous explosions. Those that were able fled the scene in a convoy of pick-up trucks.

All along the valley, Dostum's 1,500 men and the dozen or so Americans with them started attacking a string of Taliban positions. The fighting took place at close quarters at times and on one occasion a US FAC team had to call in an F-14 to strafe Taliban infantry with its cannon to prevent their position being overrun. B-52s bombers and missile-armed Predator drones were thrown into the battle. This was the overwhelming use of firepower that up to now the Americans had been unwilling to unleash. The Taliban commander Mullah Razzak was killed by a US bomb and soon his men were surrendering or retreating. Four days later, Dostum and Atta were outside Mazar-e-Sharif. Rather than stand and fight, the Taliban were now in headlong retreat to Kunduz, eight hours' drive to the east.

The Northern Alliance troops and their American allies were greeted as liberators by the city's population, who were relieved that their city had not been turned into a battlefield. There were pockets of resistance left behind in the confusion. The largest of these were 400 Pakistani and non-Arab fighters who retreated into an old girls' school near the centre of the city and refused to surrender. They shot dead an Afghan mediator sent by Atta to negotiate a surrender so a US FAC called up a US Navy McDonnell Douglas F/A-18C Hornet to drop a 2,000-lb satellite-guided JDAM on the school. It scored a direct hit and a second bomb was called up when fire was returned from the ruins. A third bomb was needed to finish off the resistance. Nearly all the 400 fighters were killed inside the rubble of the school.

Further east, the Northern Alliance was closing in on Kunduz, from three directions. The Tajik commander Daoud Khan struck northwards from Takhar after heavy US bombing blasted the Taliban lines south of Talaqan. General Bariullah Khan attacked Kunduz from the south, while Dostum pursued the remnants of the Taliban from Mazar-e-Sharif. Some 8,000 Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters were soon trapped but it was initially thought some 30,000 enemy troops were in and around Kunduz.

ODA 585 with General Bariullah had been outside Kunduz since 25 October, directing waves of US jets on the Taliban forces north of the city. The Northern Alliance forces in this region were outnumbered and outgunned by the Taliban and duelled for more than two weeks until pressure on Kunduz from the south and west forced their opponents to start to pull back from their trenches. On several occasions the American troops in this sector found themselves in danger of being overrun until they could call in air support.

Further south, Commander Daoud and ODA 586 began their drive towards Talaqan on 10 November and first met little opposition. The Northern Alliance commander was planning to attack from Talaqan on 13 November but a Taliban counter-attack caught his troops off guard. This attack was beaten back by US air strikes, which destroyed four pick-up trucks and killed eighty-five Taliban. For the next ten days, Daoud's forces pushed northwards. The mountainous terrain favoured defence, so the fighting revolved around a series of savage battles to capture mountain peaks. Once driven out of their bunkers and forced to flee downhill, the Taliban were vulnerable to US air strikes, which claimed hundreds of casualties. At night, the arrival of patrolling AC-130s would spread fear into the ranks of the Taliban who watched as the gunships relentlessly picked off tanks, artillery and bunkers in their defensive positions. The US air strikes resulted in the destruction of twelve tanks, four ammunition dumps, three BMP and three BTR armoured vehicles, fifty-one trucks, forty-four bunkers and seven mortars. The American FACs claimed more than 2,000 enemy troops were killed or injured in the ten-day battle that brought them to the outskirts of Kunduz.

In the ten days it took Daoud's men to reach Kunduz, their supporting US FACs claimed to have used air strikes to destroy fifty-one Taliban trucks, forty-four bunkers, twelve tanks and four ammunition dumps, as well as killing or wounding some 2,000 Taliban fighters.

*A BLU-82 detonates. The fuel air explosive generates a very powerful shockwave that is fatal for anyone caught close to its detonation point.
(USAF)*



A US forward air controller calls in air strikes on Kunduz in November 2001. (US Army)

By 21 November, the Taliban and their allies were trapped in a tight pocket around Kunduz, with American multiple FAC teams directing wave after wave of air strikes against them over the next four days. An attack by Daoud's men on 23 November captured the town of Khanabad on the outskirts of Kunduz and 600 Taliban fighters surrendered to them. The morale of the defenders was starting to crack. The majority of the defenders were local tribal fighters and they were very keen to surrender.

Among the most mysterious aspects of the fighting in the north of Afghanistan during October and November 2001, are persistent reports that the US government made a secret deal with the Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to allow five Pakistani air force C-130s and several chartered Antonovs to fly into besieged Kunduz to evacuate hundreds of Pakistani military advisors and Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency agents. A need to placate Pakistani unhappiness over the Northern Alliance's occupation of Kabul led the US to turn a blind eye to the airlift.



Pakistani Air Force C-130 Hercules are alleged to have made covert flights to Kunduz to evacuate Pakistani military advisors and senior Taliban

commanders as part of a secret deal struck at the height of the siege of the city. (USAF/TSgt Maria J. Bare)

Over three nights, local people reported several aircraft landing at Kunduz airport under the noses of US and Northern Alliance troops. US Army Special Forces' troops on the ground are alleged to have asked for US Navy fighters to intercept and shoot down the aircraft but were over-ruled at the highest level in Washington. Some media reports claimed the nocturnal flights also brought out hundreds of Al Qaeda and Uzbek Islamic fighters. Musharraf reportedly said the flights were essential to keep his pro-Taliban army and intelligence services on side and prevent a coup d'état against his military regime. At the time, Pentagon spokesman Marine Colonel David Lapan dismissed the reports as a 'conspiracy theory' but the story did not die and has entered the folklore of the Afghan war. Intriguingly, several CIA operatives in their memoirs of the Afghan war do not dispute that the evacuation took place. US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh subsequently claimed the White House agreed to the airlift to reward Musharraf for his help but that the deal only specified three flights to get a handful of ISI officers out of Kunduz. In the chaos, hundreds of other people barged their way onto the flights. Horrified US soldiers outside Kunduz dubbed the flight Operation Evil Airlift.

Chaos reigned within Kunduz. Disorganized and demoralized groups of fighters who had not eaten or slept for several days started to turn on each other and steal food and water from the local population. Different Taliban commanders now opened negotiations with the three rival Northern Alliance commanders outside the city. The warlords saw it as a chance to bolster their forces by recruiting surrendering local Taliban fighters. Hundreds of foreign fighters who could expect no mercy from the Northern Alliance became even more desperate.

In one of the most curious episodes, Dostum welcomed the Taliban commander Mullah Faisal and a 400-strong force of bodyguards to his headquarters in Mazar-e-Sharif to negotiate the surrender. The deal was done so that the senior Taliban commanders would be allowed safe passage to Herat, in return for the surrender of their men. Mullah Faisal paid Dostum \$500,000 to seal the arrangement and then returned to Kunduz to break the news to his men. American officers watched the proceedings unfold in the

courtyard of Dostum's headquarters, the Qala-e-Jangi fortress, and were immediately suspicious that the Taliban commander was trying to use the surrender as a ruse to re-organize his forces for a counter-attack to retake Mazar-e-Sharif.

The Taliban commander reportedly told his men that as long as they displayed a picture of Dostum or other Northern Alliance leaders in their vehicles they would be given safe passage. It was a betrayal and as soon as they tried to drive out of Kunduz they were cornered and rounded up by Dostum's troops. In the city, Daoud's men and IDA 586 launched sweeps to pick up any Taliban and foreign fighters who remained behind. Around 8,000 prisoners are estimated to have fallen into Dostum's hands and many of the foreigners were soon dead. Human rights activist latter estimated that only 5,000 of the prisoners eventually made it alive to Shiberghan prison outside Mazar-e-Sharif. The local Taliban were mostly allowed to change sides but foreigners and those from the south were treated brutally. Some 2,000 to 3,000 foreign fighters were killed in a series of massacres and battles outside the city and many prisoners died after being sealed inside metal ISO shipping containers. Mullah Faisal never got to Herat and was captured by US troops.

A large group of 600 exhausted Al Qaeda fighters were discovered walking aimlessly outside Mazar-e-Sharif on 24 November and eventually were rounded up by Dostum's men at the city's airport before being corralled in the Qala-e-Jangi fortress on 25 November. The prisoners revolted and overpowered their guards, killing a CIA operative, Mike Spann, the first American to be killed in the Afghan war, in the ensuing battle. US and British special forces teams arrived on the scene and began directing waves of US Navy jets and USAF AC-130 gunships to pound the escaped Taliban. It took several days for their resistance to be broken. Fewer than 100 Taliban fighters survived the battle and 50 Northern Alliance soldiers were killed.

As Dostum's forces were starting their drive on Mazar-e-Sharif, ODA 554 and a CIA liaison team were flown out to western Afghanistan on 11 November to join up with the forces of Ismail Khan who were preparing to seize Herat.

Ismail Khan, former governor of Herat before the Taliban came into power in 1995, had some 5,000 militiamen under his command and was already receiving help and arms from Iran before the Americans. Many

Taliban forces in the city were nervous and already getting ready to defect. The circumstances of the fall of the city are very confused but some reports suggest Iranian commandos secretly entered the city and helped its largely Hazara and Sufi population stage an uprising against the Taliban leaders, who promptly fled or were given safe passage to the south. The US advisor team called in a handful of air strikes during their advance on the city but they reported an ‘unreal’ atmosphere as they were greeted in the city on 15 November by cheering crowds of civilians and former Taliban fighters.

Qala-e-Jangi fortress outside Mazer-e-Sharif became the site of one of the most famous battles of the Afghan war after hundreds of Al Qaeda prisoners staged a mass revolted and were killed in heavy fighting. (Google Earth)



To the east in Bamyian province, ODA 553 had been living with the Hazara fighters of Dr Karim Khalili for the first week of November, preparing to strike at the province’s capital and a nearby strategic airfield. The Hazara were singled out for special oppression by the Taliban because of their Shia religion and tens of thousands of the province’s population had

been forced to flee to the countryside during offensives by Mullah Omar's forces earlier in the year. Not surprisingly, they were keen to welcome the Americans and were even more grateful when the US Special Forces started to call in airdrops of food and weapons. By 8 and 9 November, the US forward air controllers were outside the city of Bamyian, directing air strikes on Taliban trenches and watch-towers. After two days of softening up the Taliban were fleeing in trucks southwards towards Kandahar and Hazara cavalry, with their American advisors in tow, had entered the city. A small vehicle convoy of US and British troops from Task Force Sword soon entered the city to follow up reports that bin Laden and his Al Qaeda fighters had been hiding out there. They found nothing and soon left on other missions.

As the battles around Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz were coming to a climax in the middle of November, the Northern Alliance forces to the north of Kabul were preparing themselves for action. They faced up to 20,000 Taliban and Arab fighters on the lush Shomali Plain astride the former Soviet airbase at Bagram. The plain was only some forty miles across but the Taliban were dug-in so effectively that the Northern Alliance senior commander Qassim Fahim and the local commander on the Shomali Plain, General Bismallah Khan, claimed with some justification that their troops would only be able to break through to Kabul if they received US air support to destroy the enemy strong points built into walled compounds. Although the thousands of foreign fighters in the area were determined to fight, hundreds of the tribal militiamen were less keen on martyrdom. On the morning of 7 November, after killing the 15 Arabs attached to their unit, some 730 Taliban soldiers simply walked across no-man's land and joined forces with the Northern Alliance.

The CIA Jawbreaker team with Fahim had repeatedly requested that US air power be focused on the Shomali Plain but Washington was still unwilling to let the Northern Alliance attack, for fear of upsetting the Pashtun tribes of the south by letting Tajik troops capture Kabul. During the first week of November, a new Jawbreaker team leader, Gary Berntsen, arrived to take over the mission and tried to increase the pressure on the Taliban. Northern Alliance agents were provided with GPS devices and sent behind Taliban lines to pin-point key targets for air attack. By now, the CTC in CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and CENTCOM in Tampa,

Florida, had worked out how to verify their information by means of radio intercepts or overflights by Predator drones.

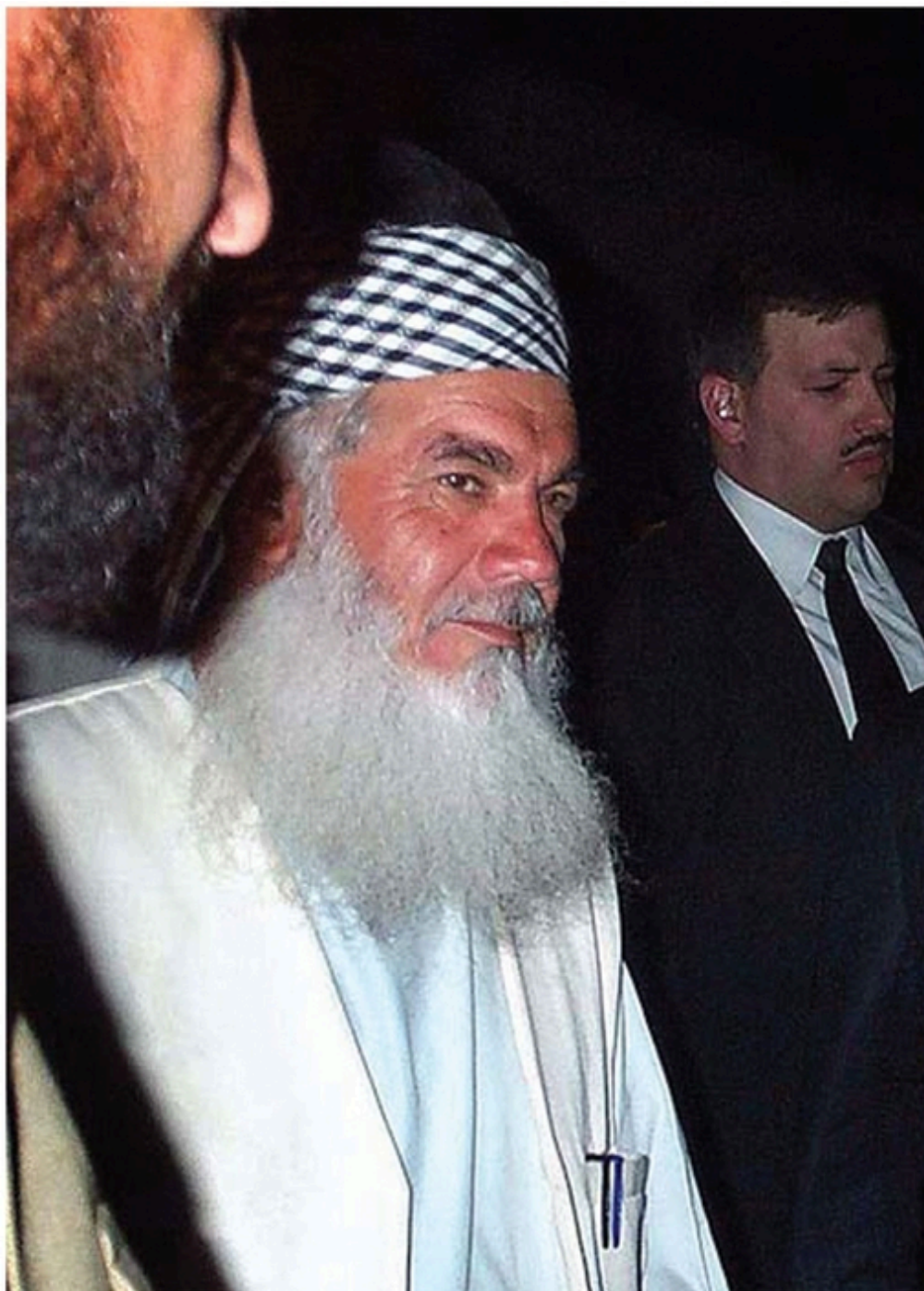
Targets around Kabul started to be hit on a daily basis. One of the most successful of these took place on the morning of 5 November when a pinpoint strike was launched against a hotel packed with resting Taliban fighters. Eyewitnesses heard helicopters immediately before two loud explosions rocked the Baghi Bala hotel and the main approach road to it around 5 a.m., destroying a four-wheel-drive vehicle used by the Taliban. Scraps of flesh could be seen on the road, says the Reuters news agency. 'We don't know about deaths, but some Taliban have been wounded and one part of the hotel has been damaged,' Taliban Information Ministry spokesman Abdul Hanan Himat told the agency. On 7 November Northern Alliance spies found out about a meeting of high-level Taliban commanders in downtown Kabul. The CIA team outside Bagram got the Afghans to sit in front of a laptop in their forward base to look at the imagery from a Predator to guide it on to the target.

US Army Special Forces FAC teams pushed down to the front lines and started to call in daily bombing sorties against the Taliban front. These were not the overwhelming raids requested by the CIA but they provided a taster for more to come. Targets in the north still had priority and controllers on the Shomali Plain could only get the services of US aircraft that were flying back to base after failing to dropping their bombs on their primary targets.

Buoyed by the capture of Mazar-e-Sharif, the National Security Council in Washington at last agreed to focus attention on Kabul and Berntsen was promised that the Shomali front would receive priority for air support on 10 November. To placate the CIA's Pashtun lobby and the Pakistani President the Northern Alliance were told to stop their advance short of the city limits. Fahim and the Northern Alliance troops were told to be ready to advance and ODA 555 FAC teams were sent to the front to take maximum advantage of the promised air support. Everyone was in position when radio messages came through cancelling the air strikes. The situation in Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz was becoming critical and the majority of US air power was needed to contain the trapped Taliban in the town. Kabul would have to wait. Berntsen was told that the big attack was rescheduled for 14 November, kicking off with a BLU-82 strike. In the meantime, some twenty-five bombing sorties were directed at the Shomali Plain on 11 November killing

2,000 Taliban troops and destroying twenty-five tanks and six command posts.

During this period US and British reconnaissance aircraft and satellites recorded images of hundreds of pick-up trucks containing thousands of armed men crossing the border into Afghanistan from Pakistan. These were the volunteers answering the call to jihad. Many were heading straight to the front on the Shomali Plain. The CIA team in the region monitored the images on its laptops in its forward headquarters. They decided to let the jihadi volunteers keep coming rather than try to bomb the border crossings. It would be easier to kill them when they got to the front.



Ismail Khan, former governor of Herat, proved a key US ally during November 2001 but he also kept open links to Iran. (DoD)

Early on the morning of 12 November, Northern Alliance troops overlooking the Shomali Plain began to report Taliban troops packing their equipment and driving south. Northern Alliance eavesdropping teams had picked up radio messages from the Taliban military command the previous night ordering its troops to pull out and head south to Kandahar. The defeat at Mazar-e-Sharif had clearly shaken the morale of the Taliban. They also appeared to calculate – correctly – that the Northern Alliance would not pursue them south into the Pashtun heartland, so the best way to save what was left of their army was to get it away from Kabul and the expected onslaught of American bombers.

Later in the day, Northern Alliance troops were on the move to mop up Taliban troops that had failed to get the word to pull out. Despite repeated orders from the US military and CIA advisors, General Fahim's troops drove into the centre of Kabul the following day, backed by occasional US air strikes against pockets of stragglers. US and British special forces and intelligence operatives, as well as hundreds of international journalists and television crews, all now raced into Kabul, leading almost everyone involved to claim they 'liberated' the city by themselves. By the end of the day Afghanistan's capital was free.

Chapter 8

Air War

Some of the most iconic images of the Afghan war were filmed by television crews covering the Battle of Mazar-e-Sharif. High above, the distinctive outline of USAF Boeing B-52H Stratofortress bombers could be clearly seen, contrails flowing behind against the deep blue winter sky. Minutes later the Taliban trench line below was engulfed in huge explosions as the bombers' payload of satellite-guided bombs impacted in quick succession.

This was vivid evidence of the reach and precision of American air power. While the handful of US Special Forces and CIA operatives on the ground were instrumental in identifying and mobilizing opposition to the Taliban, American air power was the essential element in delivering the killer blow against the Islamic fundamentalist regime.

However, for America's airmen the campaign was by no means as challenging as it was for those who had operations on the ground in the mountains, deserts and streets of Afghanistan. Many of the aviators of the US Air Force, US Navy, US Marine Corps and US Army, along with allies from Britain's RAF, were in the Middle East enforcing no-fly zones over Iraq and then quickly switched their focus to Afghanistan. Without losing a step, US-LED air power was operating with lethal efficiency against the Taliban. The fact that US air power, particularly its hi-tech command post in Saudi Arabia, was already in place meant that one of the key pillars of the US campaign in Afghanistan was firmly in place even before the war started on 7 October. Roughly the same level of air effort was being made at the end of December 2001, as was flown on the first hour of Operation Enduring Freedom.

The four core building blocks of the US air campaign were the centralized command and control of all offensive air power from the US-led Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC), aircraft carrier strike jets operating from the Northern Arabian Sea, USAF heavy bombers striking from the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia and USAF Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunships.

Each day for almost six months around 100 American bombers and attack jets flew over Afghanistan. Even when they were not dropping bombs, these aircraft had an important impact on the battlefields below, acting as ‘eyes in the sky’ for isolated US troops, scaring Taliban troops by their mere presence or boosting the morale of beleaguered Northern Alliance fighters. The combined effect of the US air power was a real battle winner from the first day of the Afghan campaign.

The capabilities of America’s precision-guided weapons were demonstrated graphically in the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent smaller air campaigns in Bosnia, Operation Desert Fox against Iraq and the Kosovo war. So when America was building itself up to respond to 9/11, few doubted that the USAF could strike hard against the Taliban but serious question marks remained over whether the Americans could actually find targets that would make a difference to the outcome of the war. Unlike Iraq and Serbia, Afghanistan was a failed third world country, with no significant transportation or industrial infrastructure, no conventional armed forces to speak of and a regime that more resembled a guerrilla army than a nation state. In a country the size of France and Germany combined, to win the war the US military had to find and kill fewer than fifty top Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders. This was a major challenge.

*A B-52H Stratofortress prepares to be refuelled from a KC-10 Extender en route to Afghanistan during a fifteen-hour mission against Taliban targets.
(USAF/MSgt Greg M. Kobashigawa)*



During the long and protracted air war against Serbia in 1999 to force its troops out of Kosovo, US and NATO air power had launched a strategic air campaign striking at high-value military and industrial targets. The aim was to make President Slobodan Milosevic pay an ‘unbearable price’ for keeping his troops in Kosovo. To win in Afghanistan, US air power had to find and strike a very different set of targets. The high-value targets were key frontline commanders and specific military units holding vital sections of the front line. By killing them it was hoped that Taliban morale would collapse, allowing the Northern Alliance to surge forward. At the same time, the top-level leaders of the Taliban and Al Qaeda were to be hunted down and killed. The key to success was effectively meshing air power with eyes and ears on the ground to create a joint air-land force, that could strike fast and gain momentum.

Controllers in the Combined Air Operations Centre at Prince Sultan Airbase in Saudi Arabia monitor the status of ongoing missions supporting Operation Enduring Freedom. The CAOC was the nerve centre for all US

Central Command air operations throughout the Middle East and Central Asia in 2001. (USAF/Sgt Gareth Davies)





*USAF personnel from the 28th Air Expeditionary Wing secure bombs that were downloaded from the cargo ship USAF Maj. Bernard F. Fisher onto a tractor-trailer at Naval Support Facility on Diego Garcia. This was the first time that bombs from the pre-positioned ship were unloaded for combat operations since it was originally loaded with munitions in 1999.
(USAF/SSgt Shane Cuomo)*



Col Chris Patterson, 40th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, presents a birthday cake to the oldest B-52 Stratofortress, tail number 60-0001, which was still flying in the fleet, to kick off fiftieth anniversary of the B-52's first flight on 15 April 1952. The 40th AEW's B-52s dropped about 58 per cent of the munitions used during Operation Anaconda. (USAF/Senior Airman Michael Dickson)

In the wake of the Kosovo war, the US military had invested heavily in key technology to improve its intelligence, surveillance, target and reconnaissance (ISTAR) capabilities to find small fleeting enemy forces on complex battlefields and enhance co-operation between air and land forces. So US air power at the start of the Afghan campaign appeared well positioned.

At the heart of the US air campaign was the CAOC at Prince Sultan Airbase (PSAB) in Saudi Arabia. Here, some 700 US and British air commanders, planners and intelligence officers and support personnel worked around the clock to use air power to enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq. They had computerized planning systems, displays to show real-time

imagery from spy satellites or stream video from unmanned drones and secure computer networks to rapidly merge information into 'operational pictures' displaying the position of all friendly and hostile forces in operational theatres. For the USAF Lieutenant General Chuck Wald, the commander of all US air operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, the CAOC was a power tool to finesse air operations with a degree of precision that was unprecedented in warfare. What he needed was someone to tell him what to attack.



*A USAF B-1B bomber and a KC-10 Extender tanker from the 28th Air Expeditionary Wing, taxi down the runway prior to taking off for a combat mission over Afghanistan on 12 November 2001. The B-1 bombers had dropped over 3.8 million pounds of weapons and over 60 per cent of all Joint Direct Attack Munitions in the first month of the US air campaign.
(USAF/SSgt Shane Cuomo)*

When US special forces and intelligence operatives made their way into Afghanistan they took large numbers of satellite radios and specially configured laptops to allow them to link to the CAOC and the main US Central Command (CENTCOM) headquarters in Tampa, Florida, over a broadband internet-style network. US officers in mud huts or on hillsides in Afghanistan could talk by satellite phone, email and even hold video tele-

conferences with the CAOC. This proved a key linkage in what the American military called the 'kill chain' and meant that the US air campaign could be conducted at a tempo and intensity that had not been seen before. Wald's staff could plan and organize hundreds of daily air strikes in a matter of hours, whereas the same level of effort would have taken several days or weeks with 1991-era command and control technology.

The CAOC was not just a tool to rigidly organize air strikes against fixed targets, but it also had the means to 'flex' aircraft to respond to unexpected events or hit emerging targets, at a few minutes' notice. Orbiting over Afghanistan were Boeing E-3 Sentry AWACS, which had radios to allow them to talk to forward air controllers (FACs) on the ground. These allowed the FACs to pass on information about new targets to approaching strike aircraft and choreograph the final phase of attack missions to match a rapidly changing situation on the battlefield. FACs were the key element in the American 'kill chain' because to avoid so-called friendly fire incidents they had the final say on whether bombs could be dropped or not. The air-to-air ground communications links between FACs and AWACS also allowed US aircraft to be rapidly diverted to fly aerial reconnaissance for isolated groups of US troops, to initiate shows of force to intimidate Taliban fighters and to pass vital information to higher commanders if other channels were blocked. These later roles for air power illustrated that success in Afghanistan was not just dependent on dropping bombs.

Wald's and his staff's involvement in controlling the US and UK air operation to enforce the no-fly zone over southern Iraq meant they were already well practised at creating the daily air tasking order or ATO, which contained every aspect of air operations over Iraq for twenty-four-hour blocks of time. The staff knew how to use the computerized planning tools to write an ATO, get diplomatic clearance for overflight rights with countries throughout the Middle East, how to get permission from Middle East governments to bring in new aircraft and make improvements to airbase facilities. They knew where to buy aviation fuel across the region and most of them had been involved in high-intensity combat operations in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s. In effect, they were well positioned to run the Afghan air campaign with only a few days' or weeks' notice.

A USAF B-52H Stratofortress bomber sits on the parking ramp at Diego Garcia waiting for maintenance on 5 December 2001. (USAF/SSgt Shane Cuomo)



However, the commander of CENTCOM, General Tommy Franks, was not going to run the Afghan campaign in the way the no-fly zone mission was conducted and made two key changes to the way the CAOC worked. First, he drew back the power to decide on which specific targets would be attacked. In Operation Southern Watch, as the Iraq mission was code-named, CENTCOM issued general guidance to the CAOC on the campaign objectives and then left it to General Wald or his senior staff to select the ground targets to be bombed, as well as the number of aircraft and weapons to be used to destroy them. In Operation Enduring Freedom, CENTCOM in co-operation with the CIA's Counter Terrorism Centre (CTC) worked out these details and informed the CAOC about the weight of effort required over the coming week and then specified the number of sorties and targets to be attacked over the coming twenty-four hours.

Further detailed control was exercised through very tight rules of engagement (ROE), which determined when US pilots could drop bombs or fire missiles at Afghan targets. The overriding need to avoid antagonizing the Afghan population and win them over from the Taliban cause meant that

collateral damage and civilian casualties had to be avoided except in exceptional circumstances. Air attacks on any target that would cause significant civilian casualties or have a negative impact on Afghan opinion, such as mosques or public buildings, had to be personally approved by Franks and in some cases Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld or even President George Bush. For pre-planned air strikes this involved prior notification for approval but during attacks emerging or time sensitive targets (TST) a more complex procedure came into play. Pilots and FACs had to first notify the CAOC via the AWACS, or the CTC in the case of CIA operatives, if they wanted clearance to bomb a sensitive target. The request would then be flashed to Franks, or even higher up, for approval. Not surprisingly, this convoluted and time-consuming procedure was not popular with US pilots or senior officers in the CAOC and was a major divergence from the experience of Operation Southern Watch, where General Wald and the CAOC had the delegated authority to order air strikes if a series of specific criteria had been met. Some USAF air force officers involved in the Afghan campaign thought the new Afghan rules questioned their judgement and showed a lack of confidence in their professionalism.

Ordnance crews in the bomb dump at Diego Garcia take a break in the tropical heat from preparing 500-lb Mk 82 dump bombs destined for targets in Afghanistan. (USAF)



US Navy F/A-18C Hornets from the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson played a key role in the first wave of US air strikes on Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. (DoD/Petty Officer 1st Class Greg Messier)

If American FACs called for air support during the Afghan campaign, invariably the first aircraft on the scene would be US Navy Grumman F-14 Tomcats or McDonnell Douglas F/A-18C Hornets. Throughout the campaign the US Navy kept two of its 100,000-ton Nimitz class nuclear carriers off the Pakistani coast and every day more than 100 jets were launched off them to fly into the Afghan war zone.



Afghanistan bound over the North Arabian Sea. Two 500-pound Laser Guided Bomb Units (GBU-12) (left) and an AIM-9 Sidewinder short-range air-to-air missile are visible under the wing of an F/A-18C Hornet from the 'Mighty Shrikes' of VFA-94. (US Navy/Lt Steve Lightstone)

The US Navy pilots or naval aviators were some of the most combat-experienced airmen in the American military. While the arrogance of Tom Cruise's character, Maverick, in the Hollywood movie Top Gun was a cliché, US Navy pilots flying over Afghanistan all went about their business

with a degree of self-confidence that could only come from being routinely fired off an aircraft carrier at 170 miles an hour. The esprit de corps of the US Navy pilots was strong, with each squadron boasting distinctive nicknames, such as the Wallbangers, Warhawks, Dambusters, Black Knights and Maulers.

The majority of US Navy pilots had flown combat missions over Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo, and even novice pilots had dropped several 'live' smart bombs in their training. In the aftermath of 9/11, US Navy pilots and all the personnel on the carriers were highly motivated to take the fight to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. This fight was different from missions enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq or Balkan peacekeeping in which America did not seem to have a direct interest.

For the three months after 9/11, US naval aviators would need every ounce of motivation because their commanders would drive them harder than ever before. The USS Enterprise was due to depart the Arabian Gulf in mid-September after six months of no-fly zone duty and, immediately after 9/11, the ship was ordered to the North Arabian Sea. Its return home had been postponed indefinitely. Its relief, the USS Carl Vinson, was ordered to make for the coast of Pakistani at full speed.

Even before the war started, the two carriers split up the duty with one flying day missions and the other covering night-time. Once the war started and the initial strikes on fixed targets were exhausted, the emphasis of the air campaign moved to hitting battlefield targets identified at short notice by FACs on the ground. In this environment, the US Navy carrier-launched jets came into their own. As the closest US strike aircraft to Afghanistan, they could be bombing targets within an hour of launching. Other jets were kept on deck alert ready to respond to a call for help from US troops.

USS Theodore Roosevelt underway in the North Arabian Sea. The nuclear aircraft carrier and embarked air wing arrived off the Pakistani coast in mid-October 2001 to relieve the USS Enterprise. (US Navy/PH2 (AW) Jason Scarborough)



A F-14A Tomcats of VF-41 'Black Aces' and Hornets from the USS Enterprise formate on a USAF KC-10 Extender tanker over Afghanistan in October 2001. (US Navy)

Each carrier had to launch seventy to eighty jets in each of its twelve-hour blocks of daily duty. Around fifty to sixty of these jets were heavily armed Tomcat or Hornets and the others were Lockheed S-3 Viking air-to-air tankers, Grumman E-2C Hawkeye early warning radar aircraft or Grumman S-2 Greyhound transport aircraft.

By the last week of October almost all of the US Navy jets would take off without any pre-designated targets and be directed to patrol into the thirty or so kill boxes or interdiction zones set up over battlefronts in Afghanistan. Depending on the battle situation and the priorities jointly set by CENTCOM and CTC, the CAOC would decide when the US Navy jets would fly and the kill boxes they would patrol. The CAOC set what were known as 'vul times' or 'vulnerable times' when they wanted to have jets overhead, particularly locations ready to respond to calls for air strikes from troops on the ground.

On quiet days, the flow of jets would be relatively evenly spread throughout the carrier's twelve-hour time block but, at times of crisis, the launching of jets would be bunched up so that dozens of aircraft would appear over critical points of the battlefield to deliver maximum firepower.

The two types of US Navy jets had very different characteristics, which influenced how they were used. The veteran Tomcat first entered US Navy service in 1974 as a supersonic interceptor but by 2001 had been re-roled into a bomber after it had been fitted with a laser designator to direct laser-guided bombs onto their targets. The LANTIRN laser designator pod on the Tomcat was the best one then in service with the US military and produced very clear images of ground targets, which was a very distinct advantage in the Afghan campaign when individual people rather than large vehicles or tanks were the main target.

One squadron of the two-seat jets was embarked on each of the carriers off Pakistan, except for the USS Enterprise, which had two Tomcat squadrons. They had an advantage in close air support because the rear seat-crew member, known as a RIO (Radar Intercept Officer), could look for

targets while the pilot flew the jet. Four of each Tomcat squadron's crews were also qualified as Forward Air Controller (Airborne) (FAC(A)) and in certain circumstances were able to authorize air strikes without clearance from a ground controller.

The Tomcat had the longest endurance between refuelling of any US tactical jet in theatre, so their crews could remain on station over a kill box for a couple of hours at a time and really get to know the situation on the ground and establish good working relationships with the US FACs on the ground. The Tomcat crew's job was then co-ordinating the flow of aircraft to targets within specific kill boxes and in some cases 'buddy-lase' targets for these inbound jets to speed up the time between calls for air support and the dropping of bombs. The Tomcats also had one of the most capable laser designator systems at the time so their crews often had better ability to find and pin-point targets.

At sea aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt on 29 November 2001 US Navy ordnance men prepare to load a Joint Direct Attack Munition bomb on a port wing pylon of an F/A-18C Hornet of VFA-82. (US Navy/Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Robert R. McRill)



With only a few years left in US Navy service, the Tomcat was not a 'computer driven' aircraft, but its crews knew how to fly it and get the best out of its systems. The Afghan campaign would be the high point of its service with the US Navy.

The most numerous US Navy jet in the Afghan theatre was the Hornet and each carrier had two or three squadrons of the jets embarked. The Hornets had shorter range and endurance than the Tomcat and were single-seat jets. They were usually teamed up with FAC(A) F-14s, which would patrol kill boxes and then hand off targets to Hornets. It was also usual for the Hornets to be tasked to work around Kandahar and eastern Afghanistan, while the longer-range Tomcats would take on missions further north around Mazar-e-Sharif. The Hornet, however, was modified to allow it to carry the satellite-guided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). This became the 'weapon of choice' during the Afghan campaign because of its pin-point accuracy and ability to be launched in bad weather.

Both the Tomcat and Hornet carried a 20-mm Vulcan cannon and the Afghan campaign would see the US Navy jets repeatedly use the weapon to strafe ground targets when they ran out of bombs. To use the gun accurately the US Navy pilots would have to take their jets down to under 5,000 feet to line up their weapons for action. To minimize the risk to their jets, the pilots would push up the speed and the result was truly terrifying as the Hornet or Tomcat dived towards the ground with a stream of tracer rounds coming out of its nose.

While the 'fast movers' from the US Navy were first on the scene of the action, the USAF's big bombers – the B-52s and Rockwell B-1B Lancers – provided the heavy firepower. Although the bombers were designed at the height of the Cold War to deliver nuclear weapons into the heart of the Soviet Union, by 2001 they had been modified to utilize precision guided conventional weapons. The B-52 could carry thirteen 2,000-lb JDAMs and twenty-seven 500-lb unguided Mark 82 'dumb' bombs, while the B-1 usually loaded up with eighteen JDAMs but in some cases could carry twenty-four of the weapons. The decision to employ the heavy bombers in the Afghan campaign was driven by their long range and long endurance. No other aircraft in the US inventory in 2001 could reach Afghanistan and then stay on patrol for up to nine hours during daytime. When combined with the JDAM, the USAF heavy bombers were transformed into precision close air

support aircraft. During the battles around Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz, formations of three bombers at a time were positioned over the Taliban front lines. On occasions, the bombers unloaded all their weapons as a single stick and turned the Taliban trench lines into moonscapes.



Two F/A-18 Hornets from the 'Fighting Redcocks' of VFA-22 receive fuel from a British Royal Air Force VC-10 Tanker on 31 October 2001. The RAF aircraft were the 'tankers of choice' for US Navy pilots operating over Afghanistan in 2001. (US Navy/ Lt Steve Lightstone)

The USAF bomber crews flew their mission from Diego Garcia and the average time in the air was in excess of fifteen hours. The bombers would fly north for three hours after taking off from the tropical island's huge runways. South of the Pakistani coast the bombers would top off their fuel tanks by air-to-air refuelling and then head into Afghanistan. In the first three weeks of the war, the bombers were used almost exclusively to strike fixed targets but as the war evolved the bombers were used to fill a series of orbits over key battlefields waiting for 'business'. At the height of the air

war in November 2001, this meant one B-1B and up to five B-52Hs were on station over Afghanistan on a 24/7 basis, ready for tasking against targets.



*A USAF F-15 Strike Eagle refuels from a KC-10A Extender en route to Afghanistan on 29 October 2001 during a fifteen-hour mission from Kuwait.
(USAF/ photo by SSgt Wayne Clark)*

There were only eighteen of the bombers based on Diego Garcia during the first three months of the campaign and the aircraft were some of the first reinforcements to arrive after 9/11. The B-52 crews of the 40th Expeditionary Air Wing and B-1B crews of the 28th Expeditionary Air Wing attracted huge support from the American public for their role in the Afghan campaign after photographs were published in the media of their aircraft's patriotic nose art.

The US bomber crews lived in a huge tent city erected alongside the tropical lagoons on Diego Garcia and between missions held barbeques and went fishing. This created an unreal atmosphere for the crews who during their missions could often hear the sound of machine gun fire in the

background as they spoke on the radio to US troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

The use of the JDAM by the heavy bombers was a key battle-winning tactic but the weapon caused one of the most notorious friendly fire incidents of the Afghan war. In 2001, the only way FACs could pass target coordinates to B-52s and B-1Bs so the crews could programme their JDAMs was by voice radio messages. In the infamous incident on 5 December 2001, the FAC's GPS device was re-set wrongly after a battery change and he transmitted his own position to a B-52 by mistake. The crew were cleared of any blame in the incident but it set in train projects to provide automated systems to reduce the possibility of human error.

For the USAF senior leadership, the exclusion of the campaign of its fleets of Lockheed Martin F-16 Fighting Falcon, McDonnell Douglas F-15E Strike Eagles and Fairchild A-10A Warthog tactical fighters was a major issue. They wanted to get their fighters into the war but the lack of airbases in countries neighbouring Afghanistan meant they could only get into the fight with the help of extensive air-to-air refuelling support. A squadron each of F-15Es and F-16s was sent to Al Jaber airbase in Kuwait in October 2001 and they soon joined the air campaign, flying nine-hour-long missions over Afghanistan, involving multiple refuellings from tankers over the Arabian Gulf, Pakistan and Afghanistan. One mission lasted some fifteen and a half hours, making it the longest fighter mission in aviation history. This was an expensive and time-consuming way to get fighters into action and, at the height of the war in November and December, the USAF fighters were only flying between four and sixteen sorties a day into Afghan airspace. When the war appeared to be winding down in January 2002 and the US Navy pulled its carriers back to port for rest and recuperation, the USAF jets were the only tactical fighters available to support Operation Enduring Freedom. As a result they played an important part in Operation Anaconda during March 2002.

The final element of US air power that proved decisive during the Afghan war was the AC-130U/H Spectre gunship. The gunship concept is unique to the USAF and dates back to the Vietnam war in the 1960s when there was a need to provide heavy precision firepower for besieged jungle bases. Racks of machine guns and even howitzers were loaded into transport aircraft and then they would circle over targets creating a 'cone' of horrendous

firepower. At night, the gunships were an awesome sight as they circled their targets with red tracer firing down onto a small spot on the ground.

By 2001, the USAF's Special Operations Command had significantly improved the gunship design to incorporate computer guidance to allow the fire of all the aircraft's weapons to be directed on an area of a few metres square. The 2001-vintage AC-130 variant also boasted high-resolution thermal imaging cameras to give the aircraft's crews an unprecedented view of the ground at night.

Two versions were in use over Afghanistan in 2001, the older AC-130H Spectre, which boasted one 40-mm L/60 Bofors cannon and a 105-mm M102 howitzer, and the AC-130U Spooky II, which was armed with a 25-mm GAU-12/U Equalizer five-barrelled gatling cannon, a 40-mm L/60 Bofors cannon and a 105-mm M102 howitzer.



The AC-130 Spectre gunship's awesome firepower proved decisive in engagement after engagement in Afghanistan. The aircraft's ability to remain on station for more than nine hours meant it could dominate Afghan battlefields for extended periods of time. (USAF)

The AC-130 came into its own in Afghanistan because of its ability to remain on station for up to nine hours at a time. This was long enough to remain overhead an isolated special force detachment all night long when combined with its night vision systems. This meant that the AC-130 was regarded as a 'guardian angel' by outnumbered US troops because it could provide a protective bubble of observation and firepower to keep Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters from overrunning their positions.

The one weakness of the AC-130s was their slow speed and the low altitude they had to operate at. This meant they were very vulnerable to manportable surface-to-air missiles and to stay safe had to operate under the cover of darkness. While this added to their mystique and made the Taliban very afraid of them, it meant their protective bubble had to disappear at dawn.

US air operations were central to the US strategy to defeat the Taliban during the last three months of 2001. Strike aircraft from the US Air Force, US Navy and US Marine Corps flew some 6,546 attack sorties, dropping 17,500 munitions on 120 fixed targets, 400 vehicles and artillery pieces, as well as thousands of fleeting battlefield targets. The Pentagon claimed more than 80 per cent hit rates for its airdropped weapons, even though only some 60 per cent of the weapons dropped were precision-guided munitions. This phase of the campaign was remarkably free from incidents involving civilian casualties, with fewer than a dozen being identified as occurring.

The bulk of the offensive air operations was borne by US Navy and Marine Corp jets launched from the two carriers that were kept on station in the North Arabian Sea during this period, and USAF heavy bombers based on the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia. The US Navy and Marine corps launched some 4,900 sorties or 75 per cent of all strike sorties flown, compared with 701 by USAF Rockwell B-1 Lancer, B-2 and B-52 bombers, 225 by AC-130 gunships and 720 by USAF tactical jets flying from Kuwait. Between October and December 2001, this broke down into 3,700 sorties by F/A-18s, 1,200 by F-14s, 470 by F-16s, 375 by B-52s, 320 by B-1s, 250 by F-15Es and 6 by B-2s. US Navy ships, as well as US and Royal Navy submarines, fired some 88 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles in the first week of Operation Enduring Freedom.

When statistics for the weight of bombs dropped are analyzed the B-52s and B-1s between them dropped 7,000 tons of munitions between October

2001 and March 2002, or 75 per cent of all weapons dropped by US aircraft. For the bulk of US airmen, the opening phase of the Afghan campaign was a very straightforward affair. The Afghans put up little organized resistance and the main challenge was finding valid targets to attack. The effect on the ground was profound, as well as the physical damage on enemy targets, the psychological effect on enemy and local Afghan allies cannot be underestimated.

Chapter 9

Revolt in the South

While the advances of the Northern Alliance were making headlines around the world during November 2001, in the south of Afghanistan equally important events were unfolding with great rapidity. All through October, senior US politicians, diplomats, military officers and intelligence officials had desperately sought to find some way to turn the Pashtun tribes of southern and eastern Afghanistan against the Taliban. The CIA station in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, was at the centre of this activity. Extra personnel had been dispatched to expand its operation, including a team of para-military liaison officers who were trained and equipped to move into Afghanistan to establish contact with anti-Taliban forces. Unfortunately, at the end of October there appeared to be little prospect of the CIA's Team Echo ever crossing the border.

The capture and execution of Abdul Haq on 26 October added to the mood of gloom in the CIA station in Islamabad. Although the CIA had been putting out feelers to Pashtun tribal leaders for several weeks, none appeared to be interested in turning against the Taliban. There was only one ray of hope. Immediately after 9/11, a Pashtun politician from Kandahar province had walked into the US Embassy in Islamabad and offered his services to raise southern Afghanistan in rebellion. The mild-mannered English-speaking Hamid Karzai had worked as a political activist during the war against the Soviets and briefly served in a Kabul government in the 1990s before leaving Afghanistan when the Taliban started to impose their hard-line version of Islam on the country. His father had subsequently been assassinated by the Taliban, leaving Karzai determined to work to overthrow Mullah Omar and his regime.

The CIA station was not convinced that Karzai could recruit an army that could take on the Taliban and refused to provide him with any assistance beyond a satellite telephone and the business card of a CIA case officer.



An Afghan tribal fighter stands guard at a gate outside the American-occupied Kandahar International Airport on 20 December 2001. Thousands

of these men defected from the Taliban and allowed pro-US Afghan fighters to take Kandahar in a matter of days earlier in December. (USMC/Sgt Joseph R. Chenelly)

Undeterred, Karzai entered southern Afghanistan on a motorcycle with four aides and the CIA's satellite telephone on 8 October and made his way to the mountainous region to the north of Kandahar. He travelled around Kandahar and Uruzgan province addressing meetings of tribal elders and trying to convince them to rise in revolt. He managed to raise a group of 150 fighters to take on the Taliban but his activities soon came to the attention of the Taliban high command in Kandahar and they mobilized thousands of troops to trap and kill him. Karzai fighters managed to hold off Taliban pursuers long enough for him to use his satellite phone to call the CIA for help. They quickly mobilized the US military at Jacobabad airbase in Pakistan to organize a rescue. On 3 November USAF Sikorsky MH-53M Pave Low helicopters flew a team of US Navy SEAL commandos into Afghanistan to extract Karzai and several of his closest advisors to safety in Pakistan.

As Karzai's first trip into Afghanistan was coming to its climax, senior US military commanders were still struggling with how to take the war into the Taliban heartland around Kandahar. While the CIA and the unconventional warfare teams of the 5th Special Forces Group were getting people on the ground and making some headway with the Tajik and Uzbek forces of the Northern Alliance in the south, some of America and Britain's most capable military intelligence and special forces units were struggling to find targets to attack.

Major General Dell Dailey's Task Force Sword's main problem was that there was almost no actionable intelligence coming in on the location of high-value targets in southern Afghanistan. His small unit of just over 1,000 combat personnel, even with their strong force of helicopters equipped for night operations, just did not have enough men and resources to dominate the region it had been allocated.

On 19 October, Dailey's troops launched the now famous opening raids of the war on targets around Kandahar but for the remainder of the month were stuck at their bases trying to find a target worthy of their attention. The scale of the problem resulted in CENTCOM creating a force of US Marines to

augment Task Force Sword for operations in South Afghanistan. Task Force 58 under the US Marine Brigadier General James Mattis was set up at the end of October with the mission of launching raids into southern Afghanistan, involving units of 100 or so Marines at a time. The 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) was ashore providing perimeter security for Jacobabad airbase and it would be soon joined by the 26th MEU off shore. In a matter of days, Mattis created an ad hoc task force staff to run the operation and had his troops ready for action. Britain's 22 Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment was also briefly attached to the US Marines to provide forward reconnaissance.



*A view of downtown Kandahar City, Afghanistan, from the roof of the governor's palace on 20 April 2002. The Taliban were expected to put up fierce resistance to defend their capital but this proved illusionary.
(USAF/SSgt Ricky A. Bloom)*



An H-53J Pave Low III helicopter machine gunner from the 16th Special Operations Wing mans his mini gun as he searches for threats while his aircraft refuels during a mission over southern Afghanistan. (USAF/TSgt Manuel Trejo)

After Seymour Hersh's infamous article about the raids on 19 October appeared in the New Yorker magazine on 5 November the pressure grew on Dailey to come up with new plans, and quickly. The Pentagon considered pulling the plug on the whole 'kill and capture mission'. The practicality of launching long-distance raids in the demanding environment of southern Afghanistan was proving just too challenging and a permanent presence ashore was needed. On 10 November, Mattis was told to prepare to take his whole force of 5,000 Marines ashore and set up a forward operating base (FOB) within striking distance of Kandahar. The fall of Kabul three days later made most of the contingency planning for operations in southern Afghanistan by Task Forces Sword and 58 redundant.

Karzai had yet to set out on his journey to Tarin Kowt at this time, so Mattis and Dailey had little idea of how events would unfold and conducted their planning in isolation from those involved in preparing to insert the

future leader of Afghanistan into the country to raise the Pashtun tribes in revolt. Karzai and his small US advisor team only heard of the mission to insert Task Force 58 ashore after it had landed in Helmand province.

After he was rescued Karzai and his men were put up in a safe house within the US compound at Jacobabad for several days as the Americans tried to work out what to do. The fact that he was in Pakistan was a closely guarded secret to prevent the Taliban being able to claim they had chased him out of Afghanistan. After US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld inadvertently revealed in media interviews that Karzai was in Pakistan, the Afghan leader gave several media interviews on his CIA satellite phone pretending he was in Afghanistan. Karzai was keen to go back but the CIA and US military were reluctant to risk sending any personnel into the Taliban heartland unless he could prove that he had at least 300 fighters under his command. As a compromise, the US helicopters flew a group of Karzai's men back into Uruzgan province to muster the necessary fighters.

Hamid Karzai with US Army Special Forces soldiers from Operational Detachment Alpha 574 on 3 December during their advance on Kandahar. Two days later two of the team would be dead and many wounded after a US bomb accidentally hit their position. (US Army)



The mission appeared to be successful and on 14 November Karzai was flown back into Afghanistan, accompanied by a US Army Special Force Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA), a CIA liaison team and a handful of elite Delta Force operatives. They were shuttled to a forward US airfield just inside Pakistan on board MH-53Ms before cross loading on four US Army MH-60K Pave Low helicopters for the final leg of the journey to a remote location on the eastern border of Uruzgan province.

The team was met by Afghans loyal to Karzai and they were soon rewarded with a airdrop of arms and ammunition from a Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon transport aircraft. Karzai and his American advisors of ODA 574 were only on the ground for a day when news emerged that the provincial capital, Tarin Kowt, was in turmoil after the population had risen in revolt and hung the Taliban governor. Karzai immediately organized transport to move him and the Americans to the town to lead the revolt. Some of the US advisors with Karzai were suspicious that the uprising had broken out so soon after they had landed and believed that their host may have been involved in prompting the event to force the US to channel all support to southern tribes through him.

Afghan tribal fighters rallied to Hamid Karzai's cause as the future leader of the country advanced on Kandahar. (US Army)



A 44th Expeditionary Air Refuelling Squadron KC-10 Extender tanker flying from Al Udeid airbase, Qatar, pumps fuel into a Navy F-14 Tomcat during a mission over Afghanistan in December 2001. The big Tomcats took on the lead in providing air support for Karzai's advance. (USAF/Senior Airman Matt Donegan)

They were in the town for barely a day when Karzai received word that the Taliban had dispatched more than 1,000 men to put down the revolt. The Taliban were expected to arrive in Tarin Kowt by dawn the following morning.

The Taliban assembled a large column of troops in more than forty pick-up trucks in Kandahar to strike back at rebels. ODA 574 and a handful of Karzai's fighters took up positions on a hill dominating the main road through a pass that the Taliban column would have to take. Once word spread around the town of the imminent approach the mood became sombre and few fighters responded to Karzai's call to arms. At dawn on 17 November, the Taliban troops approached the first US position in three columns along parallel valleys. When the first Taliban trucks were spotted in the far distance, ODA 574's forward air controllers (FACs) called for air support.

US Marine Corps F/A-18C Hornet pilots from VMFA-251 were soon overhead and spotted a column of more than forty vehicles winding up the passes. They began the first of many attack runs on the Taliban column. F-14s with Airborne-Forward Air Controllers (A-FACs) were soon on the scene co-ordinating the flow of more US Navy jets against the Taliban.

On the ground, the FAC team was initially alone on the hill but as more and more Taliban trucks were turned into burning wrecks and the column appeared to stall, civilians from Tarin Kowt started to come out onto the hill to watch the battle. For just over three hours, ODA 574 and the US Navy jets pounded the Taliban who were now in full retreat, leaving 30 destroyed vehicles and 300 dead behind. The mood among the local people was euphoric. The battle was a major turning point in the south and for the first time a major town in southern Afghanistan had successfully risen up against the Taliban. Karzai's satellite phone was ringing constantly as tribal leaders across the region called to offer their support.

The handful of Americans in Tarin Kowt were still worried that the Taliban would repeat their attack and US Navy jets were used to patrol the desert around the town to give early warning of approaching enemy troops for the next few days.

In the aftermath of the Taliban defeat at Tarin Kowt, another anti-Pashtun chief, Gul Agha Sherzai, who was based to the south of Kandahar near Spin Boldak, took up arms against Mullah Omar's regime. The CIA and US military decided to dispatch help to him. USAF MH-53Js delivered ODA 583 and a CIA liaison team on 19 November and they were soon locked in battle with the Taliban to seize control of Kandahar airfield. The veteran Afghan guerrilla commander from the 1980s war with the Soviets and former governor of Kandahar province, was a larger-than-life character who easily fitted the Afghan warlord stereotype. On 22 November, Sherzai and 500 of his fighters, backed by a US special forces team, headed northwards in a convoy of 100 pick-up trucks.

US Marines with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) deployed off USS Bataan arrive at Panshi naval airbase on the Pakistani coast and move to board KC-130 Hercules aircraft for the short flight to FOB Rhino. (US Navy/ Chief Photographer's Mate Johnny Bivera)



Sherzai's column was joined by a small contingent of four British SAS soldiers and a representative of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or MI6. They had been working with the CIA to open links with the Pashtun tribes for several weeks and this was their second attempt to infiltrate Afghanistan. The first effort involved a High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) parachute drop from a RAF C-130 Hercules but it ended in failure when they could not find their local contact.

Their first operation was aimed at capturing a key bridge at Tahk-the-pol to cut the main road route from Kandahar to Pakistan and so close down trade with the Taliban traffic. As the column approached the town on 23 November, they sent out an emissary to try to negotiate the surrender of its Taliban garrison. The enemy were more determined than expected and sent convoys in pick-up trucks to try to outflank and surround Sherzai's force in the evening gloom. A USAF AC-130 gunship arrived to provide protection and in two devastating barrages from its cannon destroyed the Taliban columns. The next morning the Taliban had fled and the advance north continued.

*Air Force munitions specialists from the 28th Air Expeditionary Wing download Joint Direct Attack Munitions from a B-52H Stratofortress bomber in November 2001. One of these weapons was involved in the infamous friendly fire incident on 5 December 2001 that almost killed Hamid Karzai.
(USAF/SSgt Shane Cuomo)*





Southern Alliance fighters from the friendly fire incident on 5 December 2001 were evacuated to the USS Peleliu for treatment. (US Navy)

On 25 November, the Taliban launched a ‘Stalin’s Organ’ multiple rocket launcher strike from Kandahar airfield on Sherzai’s advance guard, which had reached a ridge overlooking the strategic base. For a week the advance stalled and US forward air control teams moved up to the ridge to direct air strikes to soften up the defences around the airfield, including AC-130s to hit Taliban fighters hiding under a bridge. For the first time in the campaign, the Taliban mustered large numbers of shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery to engage the US aircraft attacking them. No high-flying American aircraft were hit. When Sherzai’s forces tried to storm the airbase, they were driven back with several dozen casualties and were only just able to hold onto the strategic ridge line. Then the Taliban launched an outflanking move that swept through the desert and attacked Sherzai’s base camp near Spin Boldak. A US forward air control team raced back to bolster the defence and was then able to call in air strikes to knock out several Taliban vehicles before the attackers fled.

With the military situation in the south appearing to be moving more favourably in the last week of November, General Franks decided the time was ripe to introduce US combat forces into the region. Task Force 58 was to land ashore on 25 November. The mission commenced with operations to seize Objective Rhino, with six US Marine Corps CH-53Es – three each from the 15th and 26th MEUs – carrying some 200 US Marines launching from the USS Peleliu. The first three helicopters conducted night aerial refuelling with USMC Lockheed KC-130R Hercules tankers en route to the objective, 350 nautical miles away from the ships in northern Arabian Sea. The three helicopters in the second wave had difficulty conducting aerial refuelling but pressed on. The first CH-53Es flown by crews from HMM 163 were the first aircraft in the LZ (Landing Zone) and delivered the first US conventional troops safely onto Afghan soil.

They were met by a US Navy SEAL reconnaissance team that had been inserted on 21 November to keep the airstrip under surveillance. US Navy Lockheed P-3C Orion AIP aircraft provided continual Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) coverage around the US Marines throughout the night and on all subsequent nights. At the same time, a USAF Northrop Grumman E-8C Joint STARS surveillance aircraft provided wide area surveillance with its radars, which could detect vehicle movement over hundreds of square miles of desert. The air commanders in Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) in Saudi Arabia gave Task Force 58 their priority and a constant orbit of fighter jets and bombers would be on station nearby to provide air support if the Taliban were detected massing for a counter-attack.

A combined team of medics secures a wounded US Army soldier aboard an MC-130 Combat Talon during an AEROMED evacuation flight from Afghanistan in December 2001. (USAF/MSgt Keith Reed)



The operation was a tour de force of power projection operations. Once Forward Operating Base (FOB) Rhino's runway was lit by USAF Special Tactics Squadron (STS) personnel and declared KC-130-capable, additional troops flew in on USMC KC-130s from the US airbase at Jacobabad in Pakistan where they had been pre-positioned. The first KC-130 to land on the dirt airstrip was flown by a VMGR-352 detachment aircrew, landing an hour and a half after the insertion of the assault force. Close Air Support (CAS) was provided by four AH-1Ws and three Bell UH-1N Huey helicopters, four McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harriers from each MEU, as well as fixed-wing USAF and US Navy aircraft.

The following day a JSTARS radar surveillance aircraft detected several Taliban armoured vehicles to the north-west of FOB Rhino. After Airborne-Forward Air Controllers in F-14 confirmed their identity, more F-14s from the USS Theodore Roosevelt and Marine AH-1Ws flying from the newly renamed Forward Operating Base (FOB), Rhino attacked and destroyed vehicles.

US Navy engineers work to improve the dirt airstrip at FOB Rhino as a US Marine Corps KC-130 delivers more supplies. (US Navy/Chief

Photographer's Mate Johnny Bivera)





Pashtun warlord Gul Agha Sherzai beat Hamid Karzai to take control of Kandahar in December 2001. He was subsequently appointed governor of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in Eastern Afghanistan. (US Army)

The first wave of C-17 aircraft arrived at FOB Rhino on 28 November, transporting SEABEES from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 133 to begin improving the conditions of the airstrip to allow it to take sustained air operations. By this point over 1,000 US Marines were ashore in Afghanistan and were ready to start offensive operations. Their first task was expected to be conducting interdiction missions on the main roads around Kandahar.

Karzai and the US advisor team with him first heard of the landing of the Marines several hours after the first helicopters had landed, when Task Force 58 raised the team on a satellite radio and asked if they could begin coordinating operations. The Afghan leader was worried the arrival of the US Marines would inflame anti-foreigner feelings among key tribes, just as he was trying to raise the population against the Taliban. He asked that the US Marines be kept away from population centres. On 29 November CENTCOM imposed a 'troop cap' to limit the size of the force at FOB Rhino initially to only 1,000 US military personnel in a further effort to appease local opinion and prevent any impression that the Americans were 'occupying' Afghan territory. This was subsequently confirmed in orders from CENTCOM that the US Marines' only mission was to guard FOB Rhino.

Karzai now decided that he had to move towards Kandahar to mobilize more tribes to his cause. He argued that the Taliban regime would collapse as more and more tribes switched sides. The Afghan leader and ODA 574 headed out of Tarin Kowt on 30 November at the head of a rag-tag convoy of trucks, pick-ups, buses and motorcycles.

This hangar at Kandahar airfield was the scene of the last stand of the Taliban garrison until their resistance was silenced by a US Navy 2,000-lb Joint Direct Attack Munition. (Tim Ripley)



Karzai's fame after the victory at Tarin Kowt was now sky high and villagers feted him as the convoy drove south. The Taliban had not given up and they soon dispatched troops to turn the convoy back. For two days, Karzai's men and his American allies had to fight off repeated counterattacks, including night attacks. USAF Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunships were called in to drive the attacks back and for added security they were used to provide permanent overwatch to give the heavily outnumbered US forces warning of Taliban attacks.

The order was given on 3 December for the 5th MEU Light Armoured Vehicle Company and its mobile reconnaissance force – some 250 troops – to move out of FOB Rhino and begin interdiction operations along the main road out of Kandahar to Lashkar Gah in Helmand province. Mattis and senior US Army commanders in the Middle East, who were overseeing Task Force 58's operations, had to lobby for several days to get CENTCOM to allow movement out of FOB Rhino by the US Marines on their interdiction mission. Their task was to 'prevent/deny the escape' of Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership from Kandahar city. A few days later they were joined by a couple of dozen troops who were from the Australian Special Air Service who had specially designed desert patrol vehicles. They were welcomed by

the US Marines whose vehicles were unsuited for long-range desert operations and were suffering heavy rates of breakdowns. Above the US Marines, a P-3C Orion AIP aircraft equipped with thermal imaging cameras on board patrolled up and down the road looking for suspect vehicles.

On 5 December on the outskirts of Kandahar, Karzai halted his convoy to receive a delegation of Taliban-supporting tribal elders who were considering defecting and handing over the city to Karzai. The southern revolt appeared to be on the brink of success when disaster struck.

ODA 574 set up an observation post on a hill to monitor security during the talks and started to call in air strikes when Taliban fighters were spotted in nearby caves. During one of these strikes, a computer glitch resulted in the wrong co-ordinates being transmitted to a B-52H, which dropped a satellite-guided 2,000-lb JDAM on the US troops and their Afghan allies. Two Americans and six Afghans were killed. Karzai was slightly injured, along with dozens of other Afghans and US troops.

Two USAF MH-53Ms from Jacobabad made a high-risk daylight flight over Taliban-held Kandahar city to bring out the wounded US and Afghan personnel. They then had to refuel in flight at only 200 feet over Kandahar city to give them the range to reach the US Marine Corps-run airstrip that had been set up at FOB Rhino on the desert outside Kandahar.

Thirty-nine casualties were brought to US FOB Rhino for triage and nineteen US personnel were transferred to a USAF medevac C-130 and flown out to hospital in Oman. Twenty Afghan casualties were taken by US Marine CH-53E helicopter to US ships in the northern Arabian Sea.



A Light Armored Vehicle from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) passes through an Afghan-manned gate at Kandahar International Airport on 26 December 2001. (USMC/Sgt Joseph R. Chenelly)

During the night of 6 December US Navy P-3C AIP surveillance aircraft detected a six-vehicle convoy approaching a US Marines forward patrol base of the interdiction force in the desert of Helmand province. Close air support was called in to destroy the vehicles and several in the convoy were killed, before the Taliban scattered across the desert. This was the only ground engagement between the US Marines and the Taliban before the fall of Kandahar, indicating that Task Force 58 had not fully buttoned down the city.

While the US Marines and Australians were patrolling the uninhabited desert, the Battle for Kandahar was reaching its climax. To the north of the city Hamid Karzai, protected by a force of only 500 poorly armed and trained tribal fighters, a small team of US advisors and a handful of patrol vehicles of Delta Force, were halted and negotiating with the Taliban leadership in Kandahar. Most of the American personnel with Karzai had arrived on 5 December to replace the team, which had almost all been wounded or killed in the deadly friendly fire incident. Karzai met a Taliban delegation representing the provincial governor, Mullah Naqeebullah, in the village of Sayd-Alim-Kalay on 7 December. Karzai promised an amnesty to the senior Taliban in return for them surrendering Kandahar. Senior American officers with Karzai said Washington was unlikely to agree to the terms if they left the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar and his senior lieutenants free.

To the south of Kandahar, Karzai's rival for power in southern Afghanistan, Gul Agha Sherzai, and his 500 fighters were locked in combat around Kandahar airport, backed by US and British advisors.

Task Force Dagger in Uzbekistan, which controlled the special forces teams with each of the guerrilla groups, was trying to get the two leaders to agree a co-ordinated assault on Kandahar. Colonel John Mulholland, Task Force Dagger's commander, was not keen on a direct assault on the city, which was supposed to be full of fanatical Taliban fighters, supported by the overwhelming majority of its population. Although both Karzai and Sherzai told their American advisors that the Taliban morale was broken and many of their leaders were fleeing, the US advisors were not willing to risk going downtown. When the senior US advisor working with Sherzai asked Task Force Dagger on 4 December if the US Marines at FOB Rhino could be diverted to give his twelve-man team some fire support to attack Kandahar,

he was told Task Force 58 were not allowed to participate in ‘direct combat’. It was suggested that Sharzai and his few hundred men try to surround the city, which had a population of more than 400,000 people.

Sharzai was determined to beat Karzai to Kandahar and on the morning of 7 December sent a small reconnaissance team into the city to test resistance. They reported that the Taliban had fled and the road into the city was open. Within minutes Sharzai and his 500 men were piling into their trucks and driving up the road to help their leader return to the governor’s palace. When the senior US advisor reported what was happening, Colonel Mulholland came on the satellite radio and ordered all Americans to stay out of the city because looting and violent disorder had broken out. They stayed put but the small British contingent joined the Afghan fighters for the advance. Less than an hour later, Sherzai sent a guide to escort the Americans to the governor’s palace in the peaceful city.



A US Marine Corps HMMWV patrols the desert around FOB Rhino on 2 December 2001 to monitor any threats to the first US base in southern Afghanistan. (US Navy/ Photographer’s Mate 1st Class (AW/SW) Greg Messier)

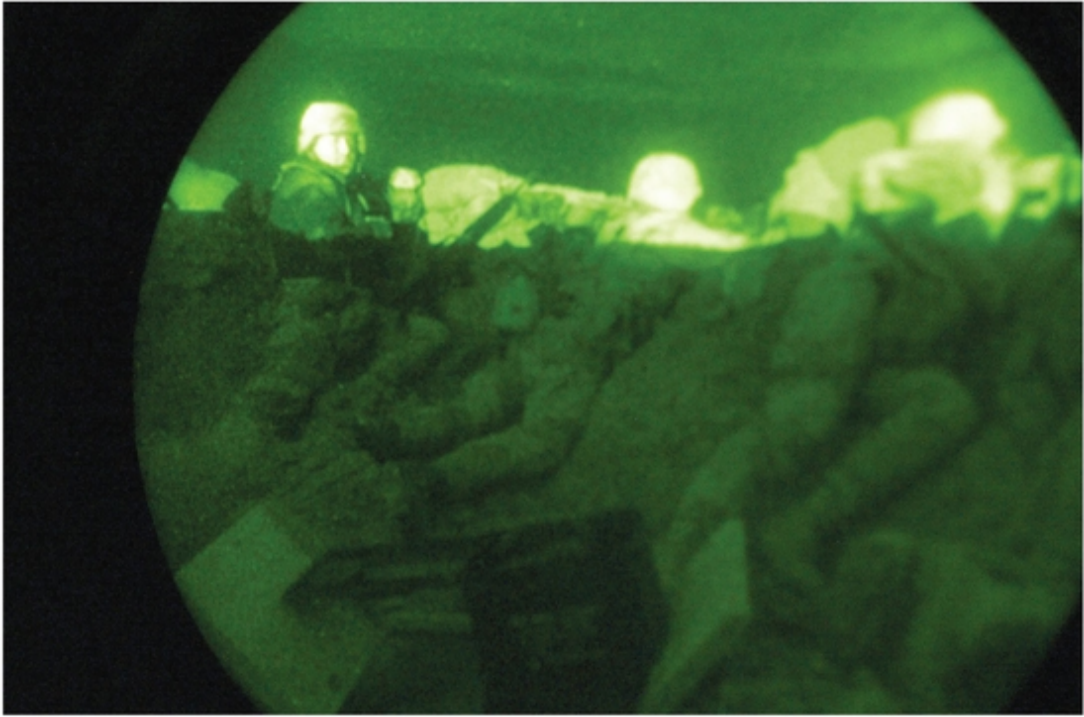
Rationalising that Colonel Mulholland was out of touch with the situation, the Americans with Sherzai decided to move into the city and by 3 p.m. they were established in the former centre of Taliban power in Afghanistan. Cheering crowds lined the streets to welcome the Sherzai's men and their American allies.

Out in the desert, Karzai was fuming. His plans for Kandahar had effectively been usurped by Sherzai who now had possession of most of the key government buildings in the city. Mullah Naqeebullah's ambitions to return to power on Karzai's coat-tails were thwarted. The Americans then persuaded Karzai that he must make an accommodation with Sherzai to defuse the situation. Karzai entered the city on 8 December and reached a deal that saw Sherzai appointed as the new governor.

The deal was sealed at a meeting on 12 December in the old compound of Mullah Omar, hosted by the commander of the US Marines, Brigadier General James Mattis. The Task Force 58 delegation flew to the meeting from FOB Rhino on three USAF MH-53J helicopters. One of the machines landed by accident on a British Land Rover, seriously injuring the SAS soldier working with Sherzai's militia.

The meeting broke the tension between Karzai and Sherzai and they soon agreed plans for the US Marines to move to establish a base at Kandahar airfield. Two days later, a column of Task Force 58 passed through Kandahar city en route to the airport and received a friendly welcome from the population. The capital of Mullah Omar's regime had US Marines on its streets flying large stars and stripes flags from their vehicles. The supreme leader of the Taliban had fled the city several days before, reportedly on the back of a Honda motorcycle, and went into hiding in neighbouring Helmand province, before fleeing to Quetta in Pakistan. His regime's iron grip on Kandahar had proved illusory.

US Marines of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) man fire trenches around Kandahar airport, during an attack after a C-17 transport plane containing twenty Al Qaeda and Taliban detainees took off for newly opened prison camp at the US base at Guantanamo Bay on Cuba. (USMC/Sgt Thomas Michael Corcoran)



Chapter 10

Spy Planes and Drones

America's war in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002 was dependent on airborne surveillance and reconnaissance to an unprecedented degree. Afghanistan's remote location, mountainous terrain and unpredictable weather made it a difficult intelligence target for satellite and ground-based intelligence-gathering systems. In spy-speak this meant, the US had to move its collection assets closer to the target for them to be effective. In the case of Afghanistan, this meant putting aircraft overhead to find out what was going on. The small low-powered hand-held walkie talkie radios so beloved by the Taliban and Al Qaeda could only be located, identified and intercepted by getting within a few thousand metres of the target. The country's high mountain ranges and deep valleys made airborne operations the main signals intelligence method during the first phase of the Afghan war.

USAF 11th Reconnaissance Squadron personnel perform pre-flight checks on an RQ-1 Predator prior to a mission over Afghanistan on 9 November 2001. (USAF/TSgt Scott Reed)



CIA MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicles fired AGM-114 Hellfire missiles in anger for the first time during the Afghan conflict in October 2001. (USAF)

The requirement to find and kill the handful of top Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders drove the US to go for real-time monitoring of video imagery. Only by having up-to-the-minute imagery of these fleeting high-value targets could the US ever have a chance of launching air strikes or special forces' raids against them. Traditional still reconnaissance photographs were just not good enough because it took several hours for the imagery to be downloaded from aircraft or satellites, analyzed and then for the product to be distributed to commanders and offensive forces. Knowing where Usama bin Laden or other Al Qaeda chiefs were several hours ago was never going to generate the intelligence needed to mount a successful operation against them.

The answer was the Predator unmanned drone. This is now the iconic weapon system of the Afghan war.

Twenty years ago the Predator had not been invented and was not even part of USAF future procurement plans. It owes its existence to work by a team of engineers working for the California-based company General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc (GA-ASI) and support from the CIA who early on saw the potential of controlling unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) via satellite radio datalinks. The result was the Gnat 750, which flew in 1992 using satellite control, and looks very similar to the modern Predator. Up to this point UAVs had to be controlled by line-of-sight radio systems. Satellite control meant the Gnat 750 and its successor the Predator could be flown hundreds of miles from their launch point, over terrain that would block radio signals from traditional ground control stations and imagery could be transmitted by satellite anywhere in the world. This was a major advance in UAV development and established a new class of UAV.

Over the past twenty years, the Predator has evolved considerably thanks to a number of key technological developments. During the 1990s, the Predator was solely a national command or theatre-level surveillance asset. The Kosovo war in 1999 saw the Predator develop into a strategic- or theatre-level attack asset with the installation of laser range finders in the Predator's sensor ball to allow the creation or mensuration of target coordinates for satellite- or laser-guided munitions. This was quickly followed by a decision to arm the Predator with Lockheed Martin AGM-114 Hellfire laser-guided missiles, but this modification was not fully flight tested until 16 February 2001 and not fitted to operational air vehicles until September 2001.

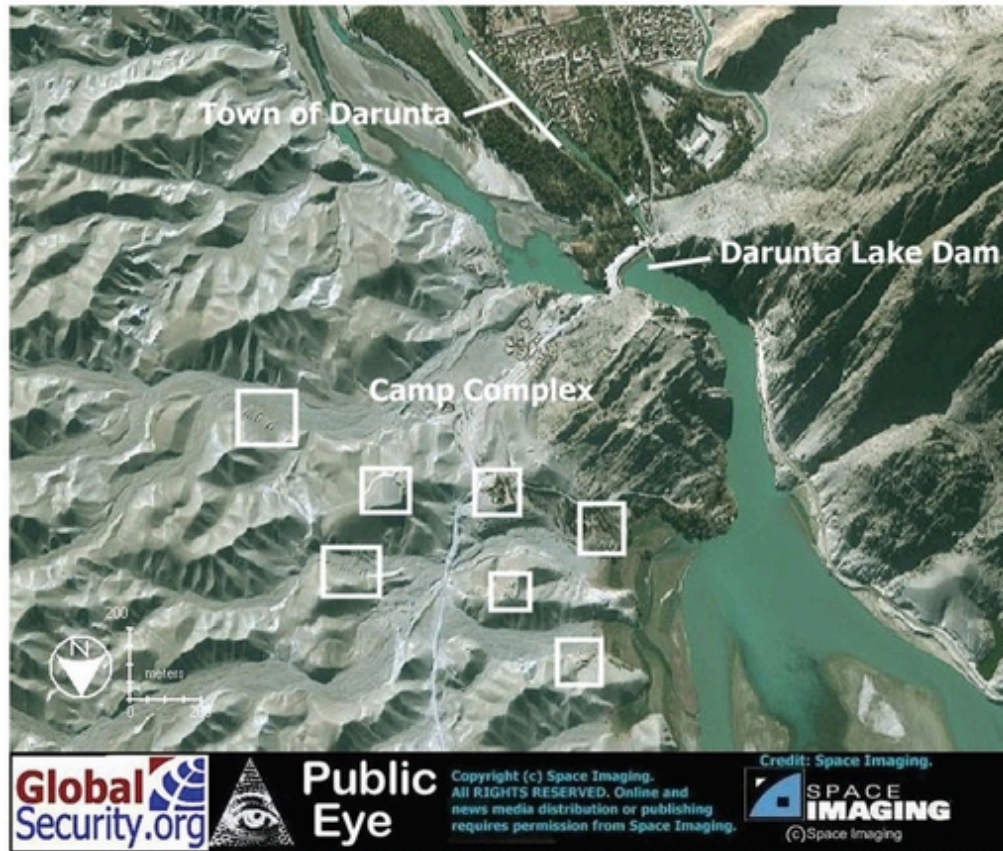
A Predator from the 11th Reconnaissance Squadron leaves its hardened shelter at Jacobabad airbase in Pakistan before taking off for an eighteen-hour mission over Afghanistan on 9 November 2001. (USAF/TSgt Scott Reed)



Only a few months before the 9/11 attacks, the technology for remote or split site operation (RSO) came on line to allow pilots in control centres far from the launch point to fly the Predator. This meant that only a few dozen personnel could be sent to operate a launch and recovery element in an operational theatre, allowing the pilots, mission planners, communication specialists and intelligence needed to execute Predator missions to remain at bases back in the US. This dramatically increased the operational flexibility of the system and its rapid deployability. The CIA controlled its Predators from a command centre inside the Agency's Langley headquarters and the USAF had its global operations centre at Indian Springs Auxilliary Airfield in Nevada. This later location was re-named Creech Air Force Base in 2005 and eventually grew into the USAF's main Predator base in the USA.

Satellite imagery of cave complexes, such as this one near Darunta in eastern Afghanistan, could not provide the real-time intelligence of the

movement of Al Qaeda leaders needed to allow air strikes to be directed against them. (Space Imaging)





Airman First Class Nathan Eberle carries out pre-flight checks on a USAF RQ-1B Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. Small launch and recovery elements deployed to Pakistan and Uzbekistan to operate USAF and CIA Predators during the opening months of Operation Enduring Freedom. (USAF/TSgt Joe Springfield)

Predator imagery was also transmitted by satellite across the Pentagon's Global Broadcast Systems and the CIA's equivalent system. This utilized an advanced version of civilian satellite television transmission system and 're-broadcast' the streaming video imagery from a Predator across a global network of satellites. Any users with the right sort of satellite dish and receiving device could pick up and watch the imagery, in much the same way as tuning into a satellite television programme. Only in the case of Predator imagery, the main programmes were missile strikes on Taliban positions in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, the Predator video feed was soon nicknamed 'Predator porn' or 'Rummy vision'. The US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld allegedly had a monitor in his Pentagon office to watch the latest video feeds from Afghanistan.

The CIA has had a long interest in UAVs as a means of collecting intelligence, and as early as 1994 it purchased a Gnat 750 system for use over Bosnia at the height of the Balkan conflicts. This led to the establishment of a close relationship between ‘the Agency’ and General Atomics, the manufacturer of the majority of the Pentagon’s UAVs. As a matter of routine General Atomics refuses to answer questions about the purchase of its products by the CIA. For the remainder of the 1990s, the USAF expanded its UAV operations, using the Predator air vehicle over Bosnia and Kosovo. The CIA watched the USAF’s growing experience with the Predator closely and was particularly impressed when it fired a Lockheed Martin AGM-114 Hellfire missile from the UAV in February 2001.



The RQ-4A Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles were still undergoing development tests in late 2001 when they were diverted to the UAE to support the war in Afghanistan by carrying out surveys of large geographic areas with radar and electro-optical sensors. (USAF)

The CIA had been building a close relationship with the Pentagon to migrate UAV experience to its covert operations organization, known as its Special Activities Division. Al Qaeda attacks on US Embassies in East Africa in 1998 had led the CIA to ramp up its efforts to try to locate the Al Qaeda organization's bases in Afghanistan.

In 2000, a joint CIA-Pentagon effort was agreed to locate Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan. Dubbed 'Afghan Eyes', it involved a projected sixty-day trial run of Predators over the Central Asian country. The first experimental flight was launched from a forward base in Uzbekistan on 7 September 2000. Ten out of the ensuing fifteen Predator missions over Afghanistan were rated successful. On at least two flights, a Predator spotted a tall man in white robes at bin Laden's Tarnak Farm compound outside Kandahar; the figure was subsequently deemed to be 'probably bin Laden'.

Video imagery from the UAVs was relayed to a flight operations room in the CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. But by mid-October 2000, deteriorating weather conditions made it difficult for the Predator to fly from its base in Uzbekistan, and the mission was suspended.

The CIA spent most of the winter and spring of 2001 trying to work out how to continue its campaign against Al Qaeda. When the Agency decided to arm its Predators to enable an attempt to be made to kill bin Laden, this set off a major bureaucratic wrangle in Washington DC over who would control the operation. It took until 4 September 2001 for the CIA and White House to approve the new mission. The Uzbek government, however, had yet to approve the launching of strike missions from its territory.

A few days later, the world changed. Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington DC left nearly 3,000 people dead. The gloves came off and within days the CIA's armed Predators were heading back to Karshi-Kanabad (K2) airbase in Uzbekistan. The first mission was flown over Kabul and Kandahar on 18 September by unarmed Predators. Subsequent host nation approval was granted on 7 October after a visit to Uzbekistan by Rumsfeld and the first armed mission was flown on the same day.

A US Navy ground crew guides an EP-3E Aries II assigned to the "World Watchers" of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron One (VQ-1) prior to take-

*off from Bahrain on a mission over Afghanistan. (US Navy/Photographer's
Mate 2nd Class Michael Sandberg)*



US Navy P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft were diverted to fly long endurance missions to provide real-time video coverage of threats to US Marine Corps bases in southern Afghanistan. (US Navy/Photographers Mate 3rd Class Gary Grangers)

For the next six months, Predators were airborne over Afghanistan on a near continuous basis. Senior US political, military and intelligence leaders have all enthused about the impact of the Predator. For the first time, US commanders had a near continuous view on a battlefield on the other side of the world.

The Predator system, however, had two major limitations. Firstly, its thermal imaging video camera had a very narrow field of view so had to be 'pointed' at a target detected by another source, such as SIGINT or a report from people on the ground in Afghanistan.

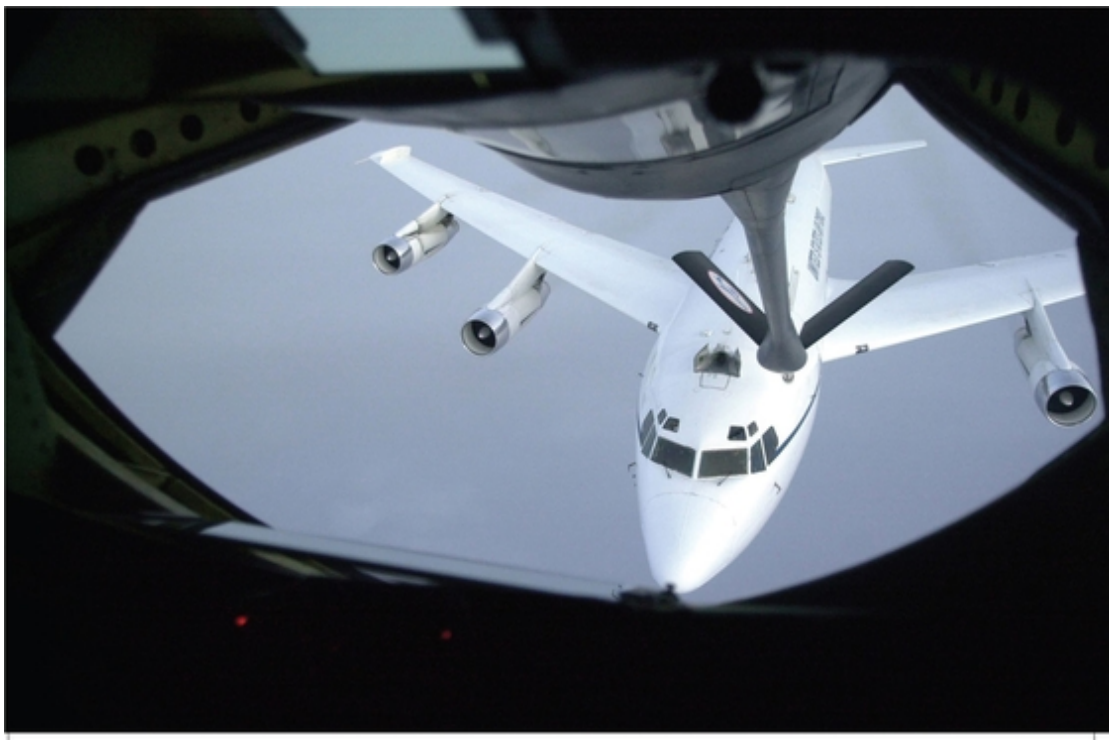
Second, and by far the biggest short coming, was that only a handful were available to support Operation Enduring Freedom. The CIA detachment at K2 only had around four Predators when the war started and the CIA had a similar number at Jacobabad in Pakistan. Four air vehicles were just enough to sustain one continuous 'orbit', one vehicle in air, two en route to the orbit station or returning to base and the fourth on the ground being prepared for future missions. The Predator was not fast, with a cruise speed of around 100 mph, but at a pinch it could accelerate up to 135 mph with a tail wind so it was very important that orbits were carefully planned to get the air vehicles to within a few miles of their likely targets.

When the USAF sent out another batch of four or so air vehicles to Jacobabad later in 2001, it meant three orbits could be sustained over Afghanistan. But given that the country was the size of Germany and France combined, it meant that only the most high priority targets were assigned Predators to watch them.

To try to get more full-motion video capability, the US Navy diverted several of its Lockheed P-3C Orion AIP maritime patrol aircraft and EP-3E Aries II SIGINT aircraft. These 1960s four engine patrol aircraft were fitted with the same camera system as the Predator and satellite uplinks to allow their imagery to be up-loaded into the Global Broadcast System. In effect, they became 'manned' Predators because they had the added benefit of being

able to fly with liaison officers from the ground units they were supporting on board. These officers could watch the video and then talk to their counterparts on the ground about the significance of the imagery. The P-3 and EP-3 could also fly at five times the speed of a Predator and so were able to rapidly respond to events over a larger area.

A RC-135V/W Rivet Joint electronic and signals intelligence-gathering aircraft receives 30,000 lb of fuel from a KC-135R Stratotanker during an air-to-air refuelling mission in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in November 2001. (USAF/SSgt P.J. Farlin)





Royal Air Force Hawker Siddeley Nimrod MR2 maritime patrol aircraft provided radio communications relay support for British special forces troops in eastern Afghanistan. (Tim Ripley)

An E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (Joint STARS) deployed to Al Udeid in Qatar to provide wide area surveillance of southern Afghanistan, using its moving target indicator radar to spot the movement of vehicles across the desert around Kandahar. (USAF/SSgt Tiffany Page)



*A U-2 Dragon Lady of the 99th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron returns to Al Dhafra airbase after a ten-hour flight over Afghanistan.
(USAF/SSgt Reynaldo Ramon)*

The EP-3E also had the advantage of incorporating SIGINT systems to monitor Taliban and Al Qaeda radio traffic, so when in the air over Afghanistan they were in a position to first identify enemy radio traffic and then provide visual confirmation of targets for air or ground attack. It was a

very powerful capability and not surprisingly it was used almost exclusively by the 'kill and capture' units of Task Force Sword/11. The P-3Cs were used a lot by Task Force 58 to support its operations around Kandahar in November and December 2001. Both types of aircraft were grouped under the command of Task Force 57, which controlled all US Navy fixed wing patrol operations from its headquarters on Bahrain Island, although the aircraft that worked over Afghanistan mainly flew from Masirah Island off Oman.

The USAF and British RAF contributed two main types of manned SIGINT aircraft, the Boeing RC-135 Rivet Joint and Hawker Siddeley Nimrod R.1 respectively. These had a similar eavesdropping capability to the EP-3E but without the full motion video system of the US Navy.

While the Predators with their video imagery attracted plaudits from politicians and generals in the Pentagon, for many of the US and British soldiers and intelligence operatives on the ground in Afghanistan more traditional still overhead imagery was essential. A major problem facing US and UK commanders in October and November 2001 was the almost total lack of up-to-date maps of Afghanistan. The best available maps were 1980s ex-Soviet 1:50,000 maps, but all the town and village names were in Russian and much of Afghanistan road and bridge infrastructure had been devastated by twenty years of war since the Red Army topographical section was at work. This made it very difficult to plan and conduct both air and land operations with any sort of accuracy. It was potentially a show-stopper for many operations. Accurate maps were essential to work out the co-ordinates of air strikes involving satellite-guided bombs.

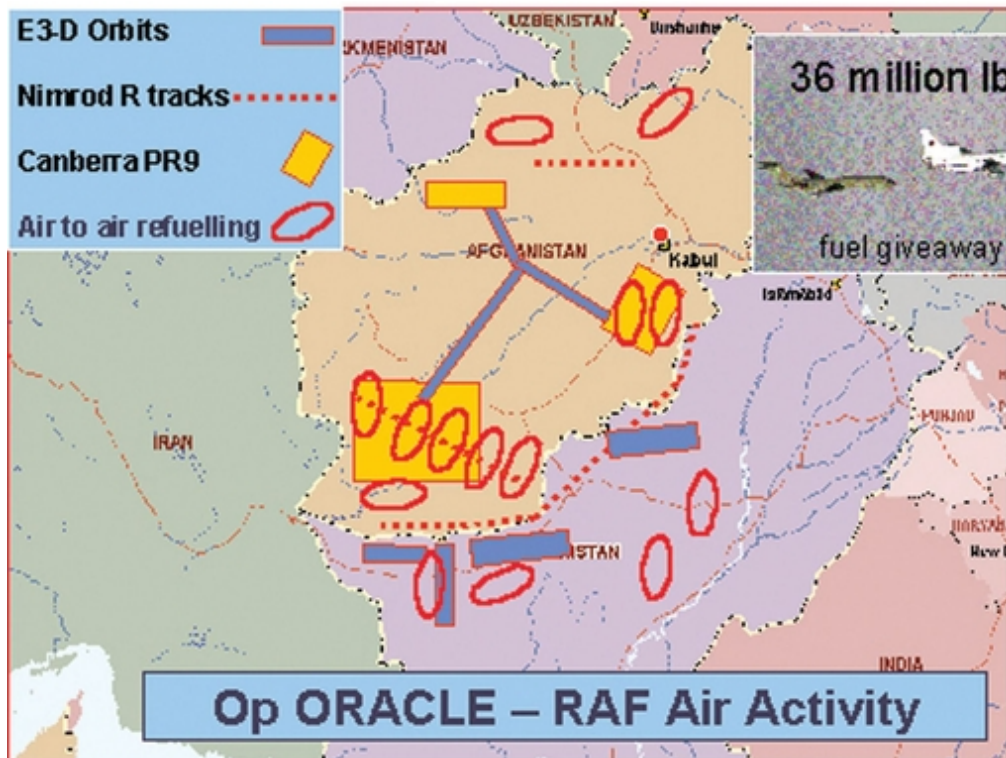
The answer was the veteran Lockheed U-2 Dragon Lady of the USAF and English Electric Canberra PR9 of the RAF. Both of these aircraft were designed in the 1950s as spy planes to penetrate the highly defended airspace of the Soviet Union. These Cold War spy planes would get a new lease of life over Afghanistan.

These high-flying aircraft could photograph huge areas of terrain in a single pass that could either be used to create highly accurate maps or compiled into electronic databases of aerial imagery. The US Special Forces and CIA teams that were inserted into Afghanistan were able to log-on to these data bases by means of satellite links or carried up-to-date versions on

CDs that they could access on laptop computers and find imagery of locations of interest.

High-flying RAF Canberra reconnaissance aircraft supplemented the efforts of USAF U-2s to monitor key targets in Afghanistan. (Saif Sareea II Media Pool)





RAF operations over Afghanistan as part of Operation Oracle. (Saif Sareea II Media Pool)

The commanding officer of the RAF's 39 (1 PRU) Squadron, Wing Commander Ken Smith, led the Canberra detachment to Seeb in Oman in October 2001 and flew several missions over Afghanistan. These missions caused consternation among some senior RAF officers when their offer to the USAF of Panavia Tornado GR1 bomber aircraft for the Afghan campaign was turned down in favour of the deployment of the 1950s vintage Canberras.

Smith recalled:

We offered the US fast jets but they asked for Canberra. We provided scarce intelligence and surveillance capabilities to the US and that gave the UK more leverage than throwing a few fast jets into the pot. We got good feed back on every operation

we went on so you never know when US generals praise us if they really mean it. The best indication of our worth was before an operation started that you were always on top of the list to go. The Americans always asked for us. We were a 'jewel in the crown' or 'ace card'.

We initially were only going to go up to Kandahar but the U-2s were suffering from bad serviceability issues and the Americans asked us if we could go to Kabul, we said OK we'd give it a go. We ended on landing back on the Seeb secondary runway on empty, the jet was flying on vapour. We found lots of Taliban stuff, including [an] SA-3 radar battery.

To speed the downloading of the Canberra imagery, the RAF crews would activate the aircraft data link and download the imagery to a ground station at Seeb while they were flying back from Afghanistan.

'In Afghanistan, the Special Forces loved our product, which was sent to them down the Tacsat radio link,' said Smith. 'They were "gobsmacked" at our ability to zoom in and clean up pictures.'

RAF Canberras of 39 Squadron returned to RAF Marham in Norfolk in January 2002 sporting large numbers of mission markings. (Saif Sareea II Media Pool)



The British and American airborne surveillance made possible many of the most important operations of the Afghan campaign. High points of Predator operations included the hunt for Mullah Omar on the first night of the war, the killing of Al Qaeda's military commander Mohammed Atef and support for Operation Anaconda. The P-3Cs provided a protective bubble for the US Marines landing at Objective Rhino and the EP-3Es were a vital eye in the sky during the Battle of Tora Bora. The level of airborne surveillance, particularly real-time video imagery, available during Operation Enduring Freedom would set the standard for future operations.

Chapter 11

Battle of Tora Bora

The fall of Kabul on 13 November was the key event for US intelligence and special forces operatives tasked to track down the mastermind of 9/11, Usama bin Laden. The hurried retreat of the Taliban from the Afghan capital two days before had finally cracked open the shield of secrecy that had up to then proved the best protection for the Al Qaeda chief.

Since 9/11, American intelligence had not had a firm fix on bin Laden, much to the frustration of US President George Bush and almost everyone in the US government and military. Huge resources were devoted to try to find out where he was. Satellite imagery, eavesdropping, unmanned aerial vehicles and a \$25 million dollar reward had failed to turn up anything concrete on bin Laden. Ever since media reports two years earlier that the US had been bugging his Inmarsat satellite telephone, the Al Qaeda chief had espoused modern communications fearing, rightly, that the US would use them to track him.

Across the US intelligence community there were hugely divergent views about where he was in the aftermath of 9/11. At the start of the US bombing campaign, the dominant view was that he would be in southern Afghanistan around Kandahar to be close to Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban regime. This proved wide of the mark. Reliable media reports put him in Khowst, close to Pakistani border on the day of 9/11. He surfaced again on 8 November in Kabul for an interview with a Pakistani journalist. Then Kabul fell and bin Laden was on the run. Rather than join Mullah Omar in Kandahar, bin Laden and around 2,000 of his most loyal fighters turned east and headed for Jalalabad in Nangarhar province on the main road to the Kyber Pass and the Pakistan border. Others headed south towards Gardez.

Afghanistan was awash with rumours about bin Laden. Many were picked up by US units and CIA operatives on the ground in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries and passed to CENTCOM and the CIA's Counter Terrorism Centre (CTC). The most promising were followed up by the closest US forces or airborne reconnaissance carried out by General Atomics MQ-1 Predator unmanned drones to check out the reports. On 16 November, a Predator located a compound near Gardez that appeared to be occupied by hostile fighters and destroyed it with an AGM-114 Hellfire missile. Northern Alliance intelligence later reported that Al Qaeda's senior military commander and a main planner of 9/11, Mohammed Atef, died in the attack.

In Kabul, the CIA Jawbreaker team that had helped the Northern Alliance capture the city immediately set up a base downtown and began to gather intelligence on bin Laden. In co-operation with Northern Alliance intelligence, the CIA operatives raided old Al Qaeda bases, spoke to local people and interrogated prisoners held by the Northern Alliance to try to pick up leads on bin Laden.

The US Army Special Forces teams in the Kabul region consolidated their operations in bombed-out Soviet era buildings at Bagram airbase. This was the start of what grew into the biggest US base in Afghanistan. At first this was only a small intelligence fusion centre and a command post to control the ODA teams in Kabul and eastern Afghanistan. Within days, more troops from Task Force Dagger in K2 would arrive to set up humanitarian aid operations and to help begin re-establishing the interim Afghan government. The airbase became the centre of helicopter and fixed wing operations in the east of Afghanistan as USAF engineers started to clear the runway and taxiways of mines and unexploded bombs.

A US air strike engulfs Tora Bora in December 2001. At the time it was the most bombed place on earth. (US SOCOM)



The ‘kill and capture’ unit, Task Force Sword, was also having to dramatically recast its plans in the aftermath of the fall of the Afghan capital and its commander, Major General Dell Dailey, ordered his main units to concentrate at Bagram. They would then spread out across Afghanistan to track down leads on bin Laden and Al Qaeda before the trail went cold. Hot intelligence was now starting to flow in rapidly and there seemed to be more targets than Task Force Sword had troops to deal with. The British were asked to deploy in strength to help, with both the Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Boat Service (SBS) deploying troops to Bagram.

On 16 November, RAF Lockheed C-130K Hercules aircraft flew some 150 British Royal Marines of C Squadron of the SBS into Bagram to set up a forward operating base in a bomb-damaged hangar. Their arrival was made without the approval of the Northern Alliance leadership who for several days made life very uncomfortable for the British troops by blockading their base. The following day America’s Delta Force and SEAL Team 6 arrived in strength, followed by two squadrons of the SAS.

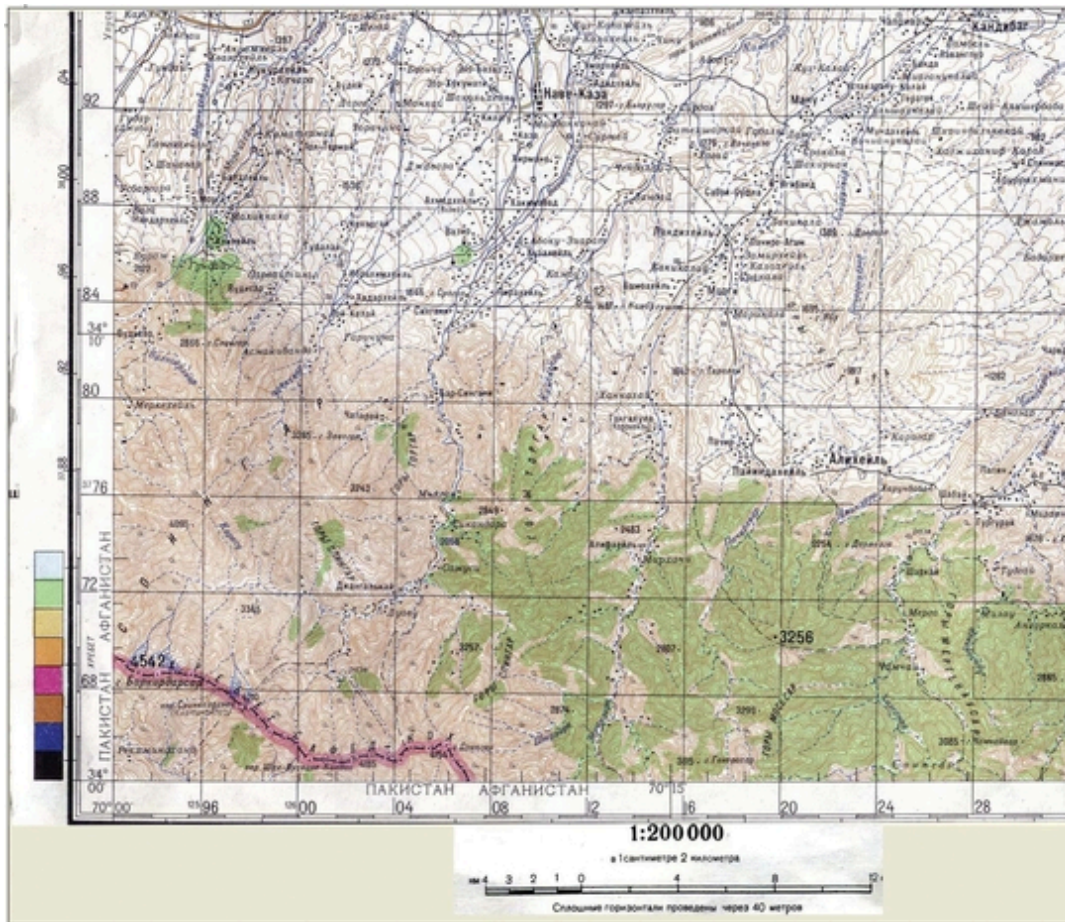
These troops had little time to settle in before they were tasked to place suspected Al Qaeda hide-outs under surveillance as a prelude to direct action to kill or capture the enemy. The first observation teams were dropped off by

helicopter or made silent High Altitude Low Altitude (HALO) parachute drops. Vehicle convoys of follow-up assault troops either drove overland from Bagram or were tactically landed by Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft. Operations in the public domain included the despatch of a SAS and Delta Force vehicle patrol to Bamyian province and a joint SEAL Team 6-SBS mission to Naka Valley in Paktia province, to the south of Gardez. Both missions turned up blanks with no sign of the Al Qaeda chief being detected. Two offensive operations were also mounted by Task Force Sword in southern Afghanistan, via Pakistani bases.

On 13 November, a MC-130 parachuted a thirty-two-man Ranger assault force to secure a desert airstrip south-west of Kandahar, dubbed Objective Bastogne. An hour later, two MC-130s arrived and began unloading four Hughes MH-6J Little Bird helicopter gunships, of the 1st Battalion, the 160th SOAR and equipment to set up a FARP. Within minutes the helicopters had been assembled and were airborne to attack a series of Taliban and Al Qaeda targets around Kandahar, including a large military vehicle park. The helicopters made several strafing runs with cannons and rockets before returning to the FARP. They then re-armed and refuelled before striking a fuel dump and compound. The whole force, including the disassembled MH-6Js, had completed its mission and was airborne out of Afghan airspace on MC-130s within five and half hours of the first Rangers landing by parachute.



The US recruited hundreds of local fighters of dubious loyalty to spearhead the attack on Tora Bora. (US Army)



Soviet-era map of Tora Bora dated from when the Red Army tried to drive the mujhideen from a cave complex. (DoD)

Three days later, the US special forces mounted Operation Relentless Strike to deliver six desert high-mobility vehicles and fifty Rangers to an Objective Anzio in southern Afghanistan by MC-130. They then moved out into the desert to secure a landing strip and FARP for another MH-6J strike force to be delivered the following night, to allow it to launch attack missions around Kandahar and depart before daylight. This procedure was followed for another night and until the whole force was extracted on 19 November.

The SAS were given the task of raiding a suspected Al Qaeda opium storage site in southern Helmand province, only some 40 miles from the Pakistani border. Approximately 60 to 100 enemy fighters were suspected of

holding the site, so two SAS squadrons of some 120 men were needed. The USAF offered to fly the SAS and their vehicles into a desert airstrip close to the objective in six MC-130s, with four US Navy McDonnell Douglas F/A-18C Hornet and two Grumman F-14 Tomcats laid on for close air support.

Operation Trent kicked off with a High Altitude, Low Opening (HALO) insertion of a reconnaissance team from a RAF 47 Squadron Hercules two days ahead of the main assault. They secured a desert airstrip for MC-130s, ahead of the main attack, which was scheduled to go in broad daylight. The SAS troops advanced on the target and met heavy resistance, which required the Hornets and Tomcats to be called in to destroy several Al Qaeda bunkers. After a three-hour battle, the SAS force withdrew with a haul of laptop computers and documents, as well as four wounded British soldiers. The US sent a MH-47E from Pakistan to pick up the casualties and the SAS remained on patrol in southern Afghanistan for several more days.

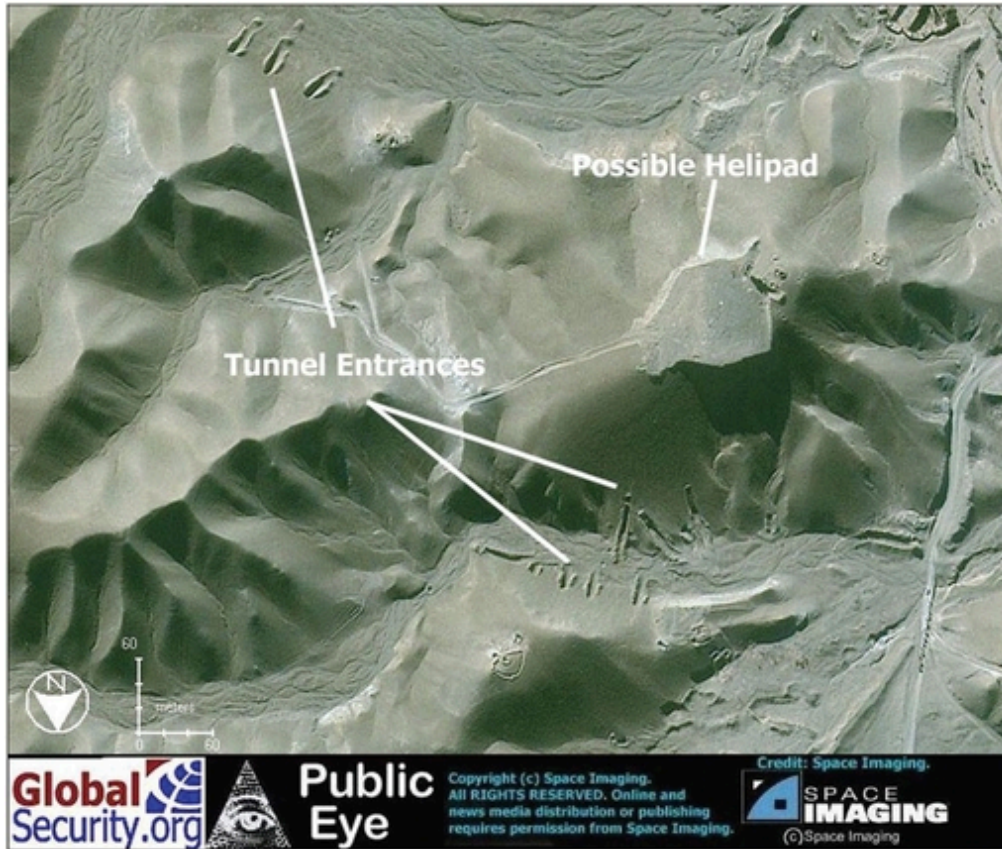
On 15 November, the saga of the eight Shelter Now International hostages came to a conclusion. They had been taken out of Kabul by the retreating Taliban but were abandoned in Ghanzi jail during a US air raid when their guards fled. The Australian, German and American hostages then used a satellite telephone they borrowed from local people to telephone the US Embassy in Islamabad. The embassy in turn contacted Task Force Sword, which organized a recovery mission by Delta Force on Boeing MH-47E Chinook helicopters from the USS Kitty Hawk. After being told to wait by the runway at the city's disused airport, the helicopters landed unopposed and the eight hostages were flown to safety at the US base at Jacobabad in Pakistan.

During the first days that the Americans were in Kabul a series of increasingly detailed reports starting coming in from Northern Alliance sources that large groups of Arab fighters were moving through Jalalabad. British intelligence in Pakistan also started to report for the first time that Al Qaeda fighters were being arrested crossing from eastern Afghanistan, suggesting that a major retreat by bin Laden's men was underway. The Northern Alliance had halted its advance just south of Kabul and had expressed no interest in advancing into Pashtun tribal territory so the Americans had few friends in this area. The CIA began trying to recruit tribes in eastern Afghanistan to the anti-Taliban cause and with the Taliban

army in full retreat to Kandahar, several tribes in eastern Afghanistan had made contact with the Americans to offer their services.

A small CIA team was soon dispatched from Kabul to link up with a tribal chief known as Babrak in Jalalabad, who was identified as a possible leader of what was now being dubbed the Eastern Alliance. They were also given the mission of gathering intelligence on bin Laden. Once in the city, they found it in chaos with rival tribes and armed gangs vying for control. Babrak and two other militia commanders, Nuruddin and Haji Zahir Ghamsharik, were put on the CIA payroll. More importantly, they found witnesses who had seen bin Laden's Arab fighters pass through the town and head south towards a mountainous region on the border with Pakistan known as Tora Bora. The region had long been associated with bin Laden after his days in the region during the war with the Soviets in the 1980s but the reports from Jalalabad were the first positive information that the Al Qaeda chief was heading there. The 14,000-foot mountain range that straddled the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was perfect for defence; the caves and bunkers along the ridge lines of Tora Bora had open fields of fire, making anyone moving up the mountains very vulnerable.

The US military had lavish satellite imagery to help during their assault in December 2001. (Space Imaging)



US Army troops from the 10th Mountain Division man a forward observation post at Bagram airbase, which was growing into the main US base in eastern Afghanistan. (US Army/SSgt Jon D. Sheffer)

The head of the Jawbreaker team, Gary Berntsen, decided that this was too good an opportunity to miss and he ordered a small surveillance team into the mountains to try to get a positive fix on bin Laden and set up a forward operating base in an abandoned school in the shadow of Tora Bora. The CIA men marched into the hills and by 29 November had set up a covert observation post and soon found the area teeming with Al Qaeda fighters. They started to call in air strikes from Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses, Rockwell B-1B Lancers and Grumman F-14 Tomcats to kill as many of the fighters as possible.

Berntsen tried to mobilize more forces to ramp up the hunt for bin Laden and approached the commander of Task Force Dagger, Colonel John Mullholland, for help. After getting assurances about the loyalty of the locally recruited troops by the CIA, the Colonel agreed to send two units of US special forces, ODA 572 and 561, plus CIA paramilitary units, to the region to mobilize Afghan militia forces to hunt down bin Laden. The militia leaders in Jalalabad were paid to provide fighters to form a strike force to push into the mountains. Then a squadron of the elite Delta Force was ordered down to join the battle on 7 December. It made its way up the mountains three days later to begin helping the tired CIA and US Army observation teams. The freezing winter weather was terrible in the high mountains and eight British Special Boat Squadron (SBS) operatives trained in covert surveillance were also sent to join Jawbreaker. Further British involvement followed when a platoon of thirty Royal Marines was flown to Jawbreaker's forward operating base by Chinook helicopters to provide security and act as a rapid reaction force in case any of the CIA and Delta Force observation teams came under attack and needed extracting.

Several concentrations of Arab, Chechen and Uzbek fighters were discovered in caves and bunkers and brought under air attack. At the height of the three-week battle some 100 sorties a day were flown against the Al Qaeda redoubt. On 9 December a 15,000-lb BLU-82 Daisy Cutter fuel air explosive bomb was even dropped on a cave entrance from the rear ramp of a USAF Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon transport aircraft. This was

followed up within the hour by the arrival of three B-52s overhead. At night-time, Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunships were assigned to patrol over Tora Bora, unleashing thousands of precision cannon shells when targets emerged. The bombing effort against Tora Bora proved to be some of the most intense of the Afghan campaign, with US Navy jets alone dropping 2,100 tons of bombs on the region or some 25 per cent of all the bombs expended during the whole of Operation Enduring Freedom to date.

Satellite imagery of Tora Bora in the winter of 2006 clearly shows how the snow could cover the region along the Afghan-Pakistan border. (Google Earth)





Afghan fighters loyal to rival commanders proved uncertain allies to the US forces advancing on Tora Bora in December 2001. (USMC/ Sgt Joseph R. Chenelly)

The loyalty of America's tribal allies in Tora Bora proved increasingly questionable. The local fighters refused at first to go up into the mountains at night to guard the CIA and Delta Force observation posts, preventing around-the-clock monitoring of the enemy positions. They then prevaricated about launching direct assaults on Al Qaeda positions. Bin Laden's fighters were putting up determined resistance and even had a couple of tanks to boost their firepower.

US Navy Lockheed EP-3E Aries III patrol aircraft and CIA General Atomics MQ-1 Predator unmanned drones joined the surveillance effort in an attempt to put the Al Qaeda fighters under constant surveillance. The Predators and EP-3Es could transmit their imagery direct to the CIA base camp at the bottom of Tora Bora, where the special forces' commanders could monitor events high up the mountains and request targets to be hit with the drones' Hellfire missiles. The CIA communication centre was little more than a couple of laptop computers and a broadband internet link running on a satellite radio, but it connected the forward operating base with

all the agency's intelligence databases, satellite imagery and video from the Predators and Orions. The Predator imagery was also transmitted direct into the AC-130s, to speed up their ability to engage targets. The Predators and Spectres played a key role in tracking Al Qaeda movement out of sight of the American and British observation posts. The mountainous terrain, and sub-zero winter weather, however, proved a major problem for the US surveillance effort even with the advanced systems in play. Temperatures regularly dropped well below zero and even the hardened US and British troops struggled to survive. The ill-equipped Afghan forces suffered terribly in the sub-zero temperatures.

More intelligence was provided by a small US signals intelligence team that set up near Jalalabad and they provided almost real-time monitoring of Al Qaeda radio networks. CIA experts listening to the radio traffic were certain they heard bin Laden himself trying to encourage his men to keep fighting. Early in the battle a CIA patrol came across the bodies of several dead Al Qaeda fighters and recovered a hand-held radio still tuned into the enemy command frequency. These CIA men also claimed to have heard bin Laden issuing orders to his men as late as 11 December. At one point in the battle, a small Delta Force team managed to get to within 2,000 metres of bin Laden's main base but was not strong enough to assault the enemy camp.

A US Army sniper team in the Afghan winter. (US Army/SSgt Jon D. Sheffer)



Abandoned Al Qaeda arms and equipment in a cave complex in eastern Afghanistan. (US Navy)

Into December, the battle was getting even more fierce, and the signals intelligence and reports from local villagers suggested that the Al Qaeda fighters had suffered hundreds of casualties and were short of food and water. Bin Laden and his men were now planning their escape across the border into Pakistan. They first tried to open negotiations with the tribal fighters working for the Americans on 7 December. For a day they managed to secure a temporary halt to the US bombing, which allowed some 800 fighters to slip across the border. On 16 December, under cover of terrible winter weather, bin Laden and his remaining fighters marched over the mountains into Pakistan. When the Americans were at last able to sweep through the Al Qaeda strongholds the following day they found them empty apart from several dead bodies. Only some twenty Al Qaeda low-ranking fighters were taken prisoner.



Much of the arms and equipment found in the cave complex dated from the 1980s and was in very poor condition. (US DoD)

The escape of bin Laden was a messy and inconclusive end to the opening phase of the American campaign in Afghanistan. It proved one of the most controversial aspects of the war. Berntsen and the Delta Force commander, who used the pseudonym Dalton Fury, both claimed in their memoirs that bin Laden escaped because the US Central Command chief, General Tommy Franks, refused a request from Berntsen made on 3 December to move a battalion of US Army Rangers or US Marines to block the escape routes into Pakistan, even though warning orders were issued to these troops. Fury also requested that delayed action mines be dropped on the paths over the mountains into Pakistan and that more Delta Force troops should scale the mountains to attack the enemy from the rear.

Franks consulted US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who backed up the CENCTOM chief. Franks feared that putting into combat a large number of US troops would make the Afghans think the Americans were occupiers like the Soviets and turn against them. The General also said it would take too long to get the US troops into position so it was better to rely on local fighters to do the job. He blamed senior US Army commanders in the Middle East for delays in getting enough infantry units to Afghanistan, while the US Marine commanders complained that they did not have the specialized winter warfare clothing needed to equip their men to fight at Tora Bora. Also, Hamid Karzai was in the process of setting up his interim government and Franks was under pressure from the State Department to wind down combat operations and concentrate on more photogenic humanitarian and nation-building activities.

The CIA's director, George Tenet, was furious that bin Laden was slipping out of its grasp because of Franks' refusal to throw more troops into the battle. Tenet sent the CIA's senior Afghan expert, Hank Crompton, at the end of November to personally brief President Bush on the battle, showing him satellites photographs of the open paths over the mountains in Pakistan. Bush had been told by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf that he had sent 4,000 troops of their Frontier Corps to seal the border in the Tora Bora region. The Pakistanis never made it into position in time to catch bin Laden, despite two US Army ODA teams being flown across the border to train a

Pakistani quick reaction force to be ready to mount operations in the Tora Bora region,

Franks subsequently justified his decision on the grounds that the intelligence on bin Laden presence in the battle was 'inconclusive', so it was not worth the risk to insert large numbers of US troops into battle. This position was undermined when the US government indicted at least one inmate in the controversial Guantanamo Bay prison camp with assisting the escape of bin Laden from Tora Bora. US Special Operations Command official history stated bin Laden was in Tora Bora during the battle. Tenet in his memoirs also confirmed the bin Laden had been present in Tora Bora.

The Battle of Tora Bora was a turning point in the Afghan campaign. It completed the dismantling of the Taliban regime and drove the main Al Qaeda force from Afghanistan. However, bin Laden clearly escaped and he would come back to haunt the world in years to come.

Chapter 12

ISAF Deploys

As the Taliban regime teetered on the brink of collapse after the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul in the first two weeks of November, a realization grew in Washington and other capitals that swift action was needed to fill the power vacuum in Afghanistan.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, senior US political leaders, particularly Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, talked up the US effort to depose the Taliban and destroy Al Qaeda as something America could do by itself. During the following month, as the realities hit home of having to find allies in the region and around the world to make the invasion of Afghanistan possible, the debate in Washington moved on. There was a recognition that the concerns of key regional allies, such as Pakistan, which were providing access to vital bases, had to be taken into account. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf repeatedly pressed on the Americans that a broad-based government that included all of Afghanistan's main ethnic groups was needed. This would go a long way to assuage pro-Pashtun opinion in Pakistan that feared that India's allies, the Uzbeks or Tajiks, would take over Afghanistan.

The Pakistanis, Russians, Iranians, the UN and the NATO allies, as well as the CIA's station in Pakistan, were all repeatedly pressing the US President George Bush and US Secretary of State retired General Colin Powell of the need to speed up diplomatic efforts to put in place some sort of interim government in Kabul. There was a fear that in the chaos after the collapse of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan could slip into a civil war as the rival factions tried to seize power for themselves. Getting a government going in Kabul was also a key precursor to allowing the delivery of humanitarian aid.

to help Afghanistan's poverty-stricken and war weary population before the harsh winter weather arrived in earnest.

Through November, momentum gathered for an international conference to hammer out these issues. This eventually took place in the German city of Bonn during the first week of December. Chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, the conference brought together the representatives of all the main Afghan parties, except for the Taliban. The Americans, Russians, Europeans and all six of Afghanistan's neighbours were present on the fringes. After hours of hard bargaining, they reached agreement on 5 December to set up an Afghan Interim Administration (AIA) by 22 December to run the country until an Emergency Loya Jirga or national meeting took place in June 2002 to agree a new constitution. To lead the interim government the Bonn meeting selected Hamid Karzai. As a Pashtun, he was attractive to the southern tribes and the Pakistanis, while his strong anti-Taliban credentials and reputation as a moderate made him appealing to the Uzbeks and Tajiks of the Northern Alliance. His excellent command of English and good relations with the international media gave Karzai a very positive profile to international audiences.



*A British paratrooper stands guard over a snowy Kabul in January 2002.
(Private Collection)*



A C-17 Globemaster III lands at Bagram in December 2001 under the cover of darkness. Night landings provided protection against hostile manportable surface-to-air missiles and heavy machine gun fire. (USAF/TSgt. Scott Reed)

While international political leaders and diplomats were patting themselves on the back in Bonn for ‘solving’ the Afghan power vacuum, on the other side of the world turning that vision into reality would prove more challenging.



*Much of Kabul had been laid waste by more than twenty years of war and neglect, leaving the inhabitants to scratch a living in primitive conditions.
(USAF/SSgt Jeremy T. Lock)*

As the Bonn conference was underway, Karzai was camped out in the desert to the north of Kandahar under attack by Taliban fighters, protected by a handful of American Special Forces' soldiers and a few hundred poorly trained and under-armed tribal fighters. He addressed the conference on a satellite telephone while a few hundred yards away skirmishing between US troops and Taliban fighters could be heard in the background. On the day the Bonn agreement was signed Karzai was almost killed when a USAF bomb went astray by accident and hit his camp.

A week later, Karzai was in a tent in the ground of Mullah Omar's ruined compound negotiating with his rival for power in Kandahar, the warlord Gul Agha Sherzai. Within hours of the meeting, he had been whisked by the USAF to Bagram airbase to be greeted by a chaotic parade of Northern Alliance soldiers, who had re-branded themselves as Afghanistan's army. US personnel rescued Karzai from the mob and delivered him to the dilapidated Presidential Palace guarded by just two soldiers. Karzai may have been Afghanistan's new leader but he controlled little of his country.

French VAB armoured vehicles are loaded onto a USAF C-17 Globemaster III at Istres airbase in southern France, on 22 December 2001, bound for Afghanistan. (USAF/MSgt Keith Reed)





Brig Barney White-Spunner, Commander of the Kabul Multi-National Brigade between January and March 2002. (Tim Ripley)

The Bonn Agreement included provision for the setting up of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) but Karzai's precarious position meant it needed to be on the ground very quickly. Rumsfeld was not keen to provide US troops for ISAF and European governments saw this as a chance to influence events in Afghanistan. British Prime Minister Tony Blair stepped up and offered troops to lead the new mission. NATO then agreed to take ISAF under its wing and on 20 December the UN Security Council put its official stamp of approval on the force.

In London, the British military had been watching events closely and preparing to turn their government's ambition into reality. British military forces had been on the ground in Afghanistan since late October and on 16 November a small UK base had been established at Bagram airbase to the north-east of Kabul to support British Special Forces operations. Planners at the UK's Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) at Northwood, outside London, had developed a number of contingency plans to move large combat forces to join the battle in Afghanistan. Most were out of date before the ink was dry on them. These plans all centred on the UK's two high-readiness units, 3 Commando Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade, which were trained and equipped for short-notice deployments on combat or peacekeeping missions. As 16 Brigade was still recovering its troops and equipment from monitoring a peace agreement in Macedonia during October 2001, the Royal Marines of 3 Commando Brigade got the first bite at supporting the Special Forces in Afghanistan during October. During early November, 16 Brigade had its readiness state raised in preparation for a possible Afghan deployment to relieve the Royal Marines, although at this stage the type of operation they would undertake was very unclear. There was a spate of media reports speculating that the Parachute Regiment would soon join the hunt for bin Laden in the caves of the Tora Bora mountain range.

This vital preparatory work meant that within days of the Bonn Conference, Major General John McColl, commander of 3 (UK) Division, was on his way to Kabul with a 300-strong team of staff officers and communications personnel to set up his headquarters to run the still to be formed ISAF. The British government then offered 1,500 troops to serve in the 6,000-strong ISAF for an initial three-month period, although at this stage there was little idea what these troops would do.

The British Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, kicked off the force generation process for ISAF in mid-December by inviting military attachés from prospective troop-contributing nations into the Ministry of Defence to hear the UK's outline plans. They then signalled their governments about the troop and equipment requirements for the proposed force. There was such strong international consensus about the need for ISAF that there were few objections about the British launching this effort before all the formal mandates had been agreed by the NATO's North Atlantic Council and the UN's Security Council.



Major General John McColl, the first commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan December 2001. (NATO)

McColl arrived in Kabul in the middle of December to find the city in turmoil. Militia groups loyal to the rival AIA (Afghan Interim Authority, Karzai's first government) government ministers were occupying key points around the city but government buildings were deserted of vital workers and public utilities were functioning erratically. Out in the countryside, US troops were still finding and fighting bypassed groups of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. The newly installed President Karzai controlled little more than his palace. McColl quickly 'borrowed' some Royal Marines from the Special Forces at Bagram to guard Karzai's inauguration on 22 December and then to mount joint patrols with newly recruited Afghan police.

Back at 16 Brigade's base in Colchester, Brigadier Barney White-Spunner and his command team were trying to work out what they would do in Afghanistan. Beyond being allocated the 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment (2 PARA), there was little guidance from the Ministry of Defence or PJHQ on the role or composition of ISAF. It was intended that 16 Brigade would form the core of what was dubbed ISAF's Kabul Multi-National Brigade (KMNB). The force would have two battlegroups or battalions, plus a variety of support elements, drawn from fourteen troop-contributing nations. The whole force would have to deploy and be sustained by air because of the lack of local infrastructure in Afghanistan. Initially, the force would be inserted into Bagram airbase until Kabul International Airport was cleared of war damage and re-opened. Overseeing the KMNB would be Headquarters ISAF, led by McColl, which would be responsible for the strategic direction of the mission and establishing links with Karzai and the new AIA.

The UK's Royal Air Force dispatched a C-130 to Bagram on 26 November to transport a delegation from the Northern Alliance to attend the UN-sponsored conference in Bonn. The representatives later transferred to an RAF Tristar aircraft to complete their onward journey to Bonn. (USAF)



The US CJCMOTF (Combined Joint Civil Military Task Force) Surgeon Cell conducts a makeshift clinic for Afghan civilians. (US Army/SFC Larry E. Johns)

A brief reconnaissance mission to Kabul in the middle of December by a team made up of planners from Britain's PJHQ and 16 Brigade did little to help clarify the situation because events on the ground were moving too fast.

Although Powell and the US State Department were keen supporters of ISAF, the US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was not keen to have a poorly armed and equipped NATO peacekeeping troops on the ground getting in the way of US troops hunting down the remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. He insisted that the ISAF mandate be restricted to Kabul and was very reluctant to sign up to any formal agreements or plans to provide it with protection in case of a major incident. It took several days for British and NATO officials to pin Rumsfeld down and he only signed off the security agreement between ISAF and US Central Command on Christmas Day 2001.

16 Brigade's troops had Christmas at home but within days the Brigade headquarters' staff were on their way to the UK's Forward Mounting Base (FMB) at Thumrait in Oman to get Operation Fingal underway. The desert airbase had been turned into the UK's main air transport hub for the Afghan mission and all the troops heading for Kabul would pass through it. On arrival at Thumrait, it became clear to White-Spunner and his team that actually getting to Afghanistan was easier said than done. The US military controlled Afghan airspace and Bagram airbase. They were strictly rationing landing slots at Bagram because of the lack of parking space and fuel at the base. Aircraft could not be refuelled on the ground at Bagram and needed to have enough fuel on board to get back to an airport outside Afghanistan. At this stage of the campaign, the Americans were also not allowing aircraft to land at Bagram during daylight because of the threat of Al Qaeda surface-to-air missile attacks.

*British troops assigned to ISAF manned a series of checkpoints around the Afghan capital to help Hamid Karzai's government establish its position.
(Private Collection)*



ISAF troops organized Kabul's first football match in February 2002 under the direction of British Football Association officials, including Executive Director David Davies, and Captain Jonny Crook of ISAF. (NATO)

The final shape and size of the British contribution to Operation Fingal was not even confirmed when the 16 Brigade command team got to Thumrait. Several frustrating and confusing days therefore followed as planners tried to firm things up and then persuade the Americans to make the required landing slots available.

Back in Britain, a KMNB force planning seminar was held in South Cerney in Gloucestershire on 27 December to hammer out the details of international participation in ISAF. Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Jordan, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Spain and Turkey all sent delegates to the meeting.

On the same day, White-Spunner and his small command team were airborne from Thumrait to Bagram. They found the Afghan capital gripped by freezing winter weather and locked in political intrigue as the members of the interim government jockeyed for position.

Over the next two weeks, the remainder of the Brigade routed via Thumrait to Afghanistan. The pressure to get troops on the ground in Kabul to shore up Karzai's government was immense. This was often at the expense of logistic supplies, vehicles and other items considered non-essential. The British Army's stocks of mobile showers, washing bowls, toilets, heated tents and camp beds, or expeditionary infrastructure equipment as the essential kit was dubbed, proved to be minimal. Hardly any of this sort of material could be bought locally in war-ravaged Afghanistan so the resulting living conditions for the British troops in Kabul were primitive. Royal Engineers building camps for 16 Brigade had to scavenge for wood and other materials from bomb-damaged buildings because it had low priority on the air transport plan. It was a similar situation with food and water, so for most of their time in Kabul 16 Brigade ate army pre-packed ration packs rather than fresh food. Giant Antonov An-124 airlifters were chartered to lift 16 Brigade's vehicles but only a few flights a week were possible until the RAF and Royal Engineers opened Kabul airport later in January. The convoluted air transport chain plagued the deployment and bureaucratic problems meant the first wave of 2 PARA arrived in Afghanistan without live ammunition.

In spite of the logistic problems, the first patrol of Paratroopers took place in Kabul on 11 January. This coincided with an agreement with several warlords to move their troops out of the capital and allow the storage of their

heavy weapons. Senior ISAF officers and international diplomats brokered this deal and then had to maintain a constant round of meetings to keep the leaders of the new Afghanistan on side.

A lead element of forty-five Jordanian special forces soldiers arrive in Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan to establish and provide security for the field hospital that will meet basic clinical and surgical needs for people of northern Afghanistan. (USAF/SSgt Cecilio Ricardo)





A British Westland Puma HC.1 helicopter arrives at Bagram in the spring of 2002 to assist UK special forces participating in 'kill and capture' missions in eastern Afghanistan. (DoD)

For the ordinary soldiers of 16 Brigade, the experience of living in Kabul in winter was sobering, even for veterans of Balkan war zones. Large parts of the city had been devastated from more than two decades of war. The population lived in abject poverty and the breakdown of utilities after the fall of the Taliban added to their privations. British troops became involved in several charity projects, including setting up ambulance services and children's hospitals.

In the middle of February, the Brigade helped organize a football match between ISAF and an Afghan team. The UK Football Association, led by the Executive Director David Davies and Lawrie McMenemy, the former Northern Ireland coach who once served in the British Army as a Coldstream Guardsman, and Gary Mabbutt, the former England and Tottenham Hotspurs player, flew to Kabul to help coach the two teams. The match was played on 15 February, before a massive crowd in the stadium, estimated to number at

least 30,000, and there was some disturbance outside the stadium as huge numbers of enthusiastic Afghan football fans tried to get into the stadium.

Two days later an observation post of 2 PARA came under fire by unidentified assailants. The paratrooper returned fire, unfortunately killing a pregnant woman passing by in a taxi. There were similar incidents on 20 and 27 February but they were attributed by British intelligence to criminal gangs rather than Al Qaeda or the Taliban. These were the only 'contacts' by the Paratroopers during their tour in Kabul. Five German and Danish soldiers were killed by an unexploded bomb on 6 March. These were the only fatal casualties suffered by the KMNB during the period of British command.

By the middle of March, 16 Brigade had begun to handover command of the KMNB to the German army. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, The Royal Anglian Regiment, was arriving to relieve 2 PARA. As this was happening, US troops were locked in heavy combat in eastern Afghanistan with hardcore Al Qaeda fighters. US commanders had asked 7th Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery if they could deploy their 105-mm Light Guns to support the battle against Al Qaeda but they had been left back in the UK. Understandably, morale in 2 PARA slumped when it became clear they would not be able to join the battle.

As the troops of 16 Brigade started to pack up and begin to move home, news emerged in London that the Ministry of Defence was to send 3 Commando Brigade out to Bagram to help US forces hunt down Al Qaeda fighters in eastern Afghanistan. This was a further blow to the morale of 2 PARA, to see their rivals in the Royal Marines selected for what appeared to be another high-profile combat mission.

Securing Kabul was still considered a high priority by the British government, the US and NATO. Rumsfeld and several more cautious NATO governments were not keen to allow ISAF to expand its mission beyond Kabul. It was hoped that by securing the capital, a beacon of security and development would be set up and this would gradually spread to envelop the rest of the country.

McColl and his staff remained in place until May when they handed over to Turkish-led headquarters, formally ending Britain's leading role in ISAF and Afghanistan until the summer of 2006.

The first ISAF mission in Kabul kept a lid on the tense political situation and helped allow international aid agencies begin to set up in Afghanistan. It was never going to be the answer to all of Afghanistan's huge problems and the ambitions for the country's capital to be a beacon for the rest of the country eventually proved ill-founded.

Chapter 13

Light Footprint

In the wake of the Bonn Conference, the fall of Kandahar and the arrival of Hamid Karzai in Kabul, US President George Bush was euphoric. In little over two months the Taliban had been driven from power and Al Qaeda chief Usama bin Laden was on the run. The Pentagon announced a series of high-profile withdrawals of troops, mostly US Navy ships and US Air Force squadrons. War was not the message of the moment.

However, the troops of Task Force Dagger were not going home to victory parades. They were to remain on the ground in Afghanistan until they were relieved in early 2002 to prevent the return of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The US Army Special Force Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) of the 5th Special Forces Group continued to be based in Afghanistan working with the warlords and their armies, while the CIA's liaison teams moved to set up safe houses in every main population centre to keep up links with the main political players and build up a network of sources who could provide information on the remnants of Al Qaeda. Its main Afghan station was set up in the Ariana guest house in downtown Kabul. It only had one Russian-made Mil Mi-17 helicopter – with the tail number 91101 in honour of the victims of 9/11 – to give its personnel rapid mobility around Afghanistan so an urgent call was put out for two more helicopters and a covert procurement effort was launched in Russia with the help of the US Army Test and Evaluation Command. This effort ended in some controversy when several members of the team faced trial for defrauding the cash that was supposed to be spent on the helicopters from Russian factories. The agency's detachment of missile-armed General Atomics MQ-1 Predator unmanned drones remained at Jacobabad airbase in Pakistan.

Afghanistan was devastated by more than twenty years of war. Its transport infrastructure and public utilities were in ruins, economic activity was almost non-existent and several million people were refugees in their own country or neighbouring countries. The Central Asian winter was about to descend with a vengeance. Although Karzai's interim government was in place in Kabul, it had no resources, people or money to actually do anything. Outside the capital the warlords and tribal militia remained in charge and only the presence of the US military and CIA liaison teams prevented their rivalries and hatreds breaking out into open combat. To try to alleviate some of the humanitarian problems, US Central Command (CENTCOM) set up a Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF) at Bagram under veteran special operations commander, Brigadier General Gary Harrell, in November to co-ordinate all humanitarian aid operations across the country. Small assessment teams of US Army aid experts toured the country looking into how to kick-start the economy, improve medical facilities and public health. They worked closely with the 5,000-strong NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) within the city limits of Kabul.

It was obvious that it would take several months or even years to get Afghanistan back on its feet, and plans needed to be made for a long-term US military presence until the Kabul government was up and running.

During December 2001, the US had some 28,000 military personnel committed to operation Enduring Freedom, of which around 7,000 were on the ground in Afghanistan. More than half were on ships off shore and the remainder were working on airbases throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.

Plans were made to replace the troops of 5th Special Forces Group who made up Task Force Dagger with units of the 3rd Special Forces Group and National Guard reservists of the 19th Special Forces Group. Their aviation element, the 2nd Battalion of 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), was replaced by its 3rd Battalion.

Additional US and coalition special forces units arrived in Afghanistan in January with Joint Special Operation Task Force – South (JSOTF-S), also known as Task Force K-BAR, which was set up at Kandahar to control ODA teams in southern Afghanistan. These were drawn from the US Navy SEALs and they were supported by several coalition units, including around 50 men

from Canada's Joint Task Force 2, 100 troops of Germany's KSK, the 70-strong 1 Squadron of Australia's SAS (also known as Task Force 64), 40 troops from New Zealand's 1 SAS group, a 100 troop team of Denmark's Hunter and Frogmen Corps and 110 men of the Norwegian Special Forces. Afghanistan was divided geographically between the two organizations, with Task Force Dagger running the north and the region around the capital and Task Force K-BAR looking after the south and the border region up to Khowst province.

Kandahar airfield was being repaired to transform it into the main US base in southern Afghanistan by the US Marines of Task Force 58. They were scheduled to be replaced by a brigade combat team of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) by the middle of January and an infantry battalion of the 10th Mountain Division was sent to guard Bagram airbase in December. USAF Special Operations Command Sikorsky MH-53M helicopters and Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft were pulled back from Kandahar to Pakistan and Oman.

The USAF, US Marine Corps and NATO airlift units were ramping up their operation to flow in troops, vehicles and other equipment because overland routes into landlocked Afghanistan were still not open. Airfield construction, engineering and bomb disposal units were in the first wave of this operation to bring Afghanistan's devastated airfield back into use. The USAF concentrated on turning Bagram and Kandahar airbases into major hubs for new ground combat units that were starting to flow into the country, while the British RAF was given the job of getting Kabul International Airport back into use as the main hub for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), that was taking over responsibility for security in the Afghan capital.

US Army soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) prepare to board a Chinook helicopter in February 2002 ahead of a patrol in a mountainous area near Kandahar International Airport. (USAF/SSgt Derrick C. Goode)



US and UK air traffic controllers supervised the landing and take-off of military aircraft and on regular occasions civilian aircraft carrying returning refugees, aid workers and international diplomats. A major problem was the lack of bulk fuel supplies in-country, so aircraft needed to land with enough fuel in their tanks to allow them to complete their outbound journeys. With the security situation still fragile in much of the country, the US and ISAF military authorities limited the type of aircraft that could land in daylight. A strict system of 'landing slots' was co-ordinated from the USAF-run Regional Air Movement Co-ordination Center (RAMCC) at Al Udeid airbase in Qatar.

The lack of infrastructure and fuel in the country meant that the USAF and its allies were not yet able to move fighter aircraft into Afghanistan to provide close air support for any ground troops in danger. Jets from US Navy aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea as well as fighters and bombers at bases around the Middle East were used to provide regular coverage over Afghanistan. The Boeing B-52H Stratofortress detachment on the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia and B-1Bs at Thumrait in Oman, flew daily missions over Afghanistan. USAF McDonnell Douglas F-15E Strike Eagles and Lockheed Martin F-16s in Kuwait made forays over

Afghanistan with the aid of extensive air-to-air refuelling support. They were soon to be joined by US Marine Corps McDonnell Douglas F/A-18D Hornets and French air force Dassault Mirage 2000s flying from Manas in Kyrgyzstan. The priority for in-country air operations was given to helicopters for tactical support and C-130s for intra-theatre movements of troops around a network of dirt strips in remote areas of Afghanistan.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was determined to keep troop numbers to an absolute minimum to avoid getting the US sucked into what he derisively called 'nation building'. The big fear of Rumsfeld and many senior US military officers was that if the Afghan people saw large numbers of American troops in their country they would regard them as invaders and turn on them, as they had on the Soviets. This was a quick way to a Vietnam-style 'quagmire', said Rumsfeld. Every aspect of the troop rotation was scrutinized intensely by Rumsfeld, who even initially vetoed the 101st Airborne taking any of its McDonnell Douglas AH-64A Apache gunships with them to Afghanistan. Requests to deploy artillery were rejected by Rumsfeld.

Many changes also took place to the elite units of Task Force Sword, who still had the mission of killing and capturing Al Qaeda's senior leaders. In January 2002 Major General Dell Dailey handed over command of the task force, which was now dubbed Task Force 11, to his deputy, USAF Major General Gregory Trebon, and returned to the US to do his day job as head of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). US Navy SEALs replaced Delta Force as the main 'tier one' unit in the task force. The 1st Battalion, of the 75th Ranger Regiment, replaced the 3rd Battalion. A new intelligence fusion centre, dubbed Task Force Bowie, opened at Bagram airbase to help Task Force 11, and its eyes and ears on the ground were the so-called Advance Force Operations (AFO) units.

Task Force 11's forces were split between Bagram airbase and Masirah Island off the coast of Oman, where its main command post was also located. The 'kill and capture' force was also augmented by a team of British Special Boat Service (SBS) commandos. They had arrived at Bagram and set up a forward operating base at Bagram airbase. To support them 40 Commando Royal Marines was also at Bagram. It guarded the compound and provided a quick reaction force if any of the small SBS units got into trouble. A couple of Boeing Chinook HC.2As, of the UK Joint Special

Forces Aviation Wing, based at Bagram airbase to support the UK Special Forces in Afghanistan, were the only non-US combat aircraft in the country at this time.

The biggest evolution of the US presence in Afghanistan was the re-organization of the land forces command structure in the country during January 2002. All units except for those of Task Force 11 were placed under the control of the US Army's Middle East headquarters in Kuwait. This brought unity of command to all the disparate US forces in Afghanistan but imposed a layer of military bureaucracy between the troops on the ground and CENTCOM's headquarters in Tampa Florida. On 15 February, the headquarters of the 10th Mountain Division moved south from K2 in Uzbekistan to take command of all US ground forces in Afghanistan, except Task Force 11. Dubbed Combined Joint Task Force Mountain, this headquarters was not a full divisional command centre because Rumsfeld continued to impose a tight troop cap on the number of US military personnel in Afghanistan. Its commander, Major General 'Buster' Hagenbeck, was determined to get his troops from the 10th and 101st Divisions involved in offensive operations as soon as possible.

US soldiers hurry to load ammunition onto a waiting CH-47 Chinook helicopter during the heavy fighting that erupted following the launching of Operation Anaconda in March 2002. (USAF/MSgt Keith Reed)



The defeat of the Taliban meant the US military and CIA could put renewed effort into their mission to locate and investigate so-called sensitive sites associated with Al Qaeda to try to pick up leads from documents, abandoned equipment, laptop computers and local witnesses that might provide advance warning of future terrorist attacks or lead them to the hiding place of Usama bin Laden. One of Task Force Dagger's companies was organized as a quick reaction force to conduct Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) missions at short notice, with its own bomb disposal experts to disarm booby traps and make safe weapon caches, as well as forensic personnel to recover biometric data on Al Qaeda suspects.

US Navy SEALs commandos discover a cache of munitions and weapons while conducting a Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) mission in the Jaji mountains on 12 February 2002. (US Navy/Photographer's Mate 1st Class Tim Turner)



The CIA and a range of US military intelligence organizations still had great interest in eastern Afghanistan. Many parts of Ghanzi, Konar, Nangarhar, Khowst and Paktia province, which bordered Pakistan, had not been entered by Northern Alliance troops and their American advisors since the collapse of the Taliban regime. This mountainous region had few roads and was the perfect place for small groups of Al Qaeda fighters to hide undetected for many months.

Although the CIA had set up a network of safe houses and recruited small groups of militia fighters in these provinces, they remained convinced that a significant undefeated group of Al Qaeda fighters remained at large. In mid-December 2001, a CIA team travelled to Ghanzi and seized two senior Taliban intelligence operatives linked to Al Qaeda and had to make an emergency evacuation by helicopter when tribal fighters tried to rescue the prisoners. Persistent reports of a strong Al Qaeda presence in these border regions conflicted with the upbeat assessments from Washington that only small and demoralized remnants of Al Qaeda were left in Afghanistan.

The CIA's Predator drones, helped by USAF drones, were used extensively to patrol the border region, looking for signs of enemy activity

and providing overwatch of operations in case US and coalition forces were attacked.

As a result, January and February 2002 saw a continuing series of raids, sweeps and air strikes against known or suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban hide-outs around Afghanistan. Task Force Dagger, Task Force K-BAR and CIA units continued to be active in eastern Afghanistan in the weeks after the Battle of Tora Bora. They followed up a string of leads from Afghan sources that Al Qaeda fighters that had been left behind were still at large. Cave complexes that were suspected of containing valuable intelligence were also targeted.

In southern Afghanistan, the US Marines of Task Force 58 carried out their first SSE (Sensitive Site Exploitation) mission on 15 December against a suspected Al Qaeda site near FOB Rhino. The helicopter borne raid turned up nothing of interest but it gave 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) its first experience of operating in Afghan villages.

The large suspected Al Qaeda cave complex at Zhawar Kili near Khowst in eastern Afghanistan was raided by a small Task Force K-BAR team, backed by a US Marine Corps company, in the first week of January. On the first day they were engaged by a couple of fighters who ran off when the size of the US force became clear. The cave complex, which had been attacked by cruise missiles in 1998 in the response to Al Qaeda bombings of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, was then searched and a large haul of documents and other evidence was recovered. Once the search was complete, the US Navy SEALs called in four B-1Bs, four US Navy McDonnell Douglas F/A-18C Hornets and an AC-130 gunship to put the caves out of use. Some 120 satellite-guided 2,000-lb Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs) were dropped to seal cave entrances. This was the first of some twenty SSE missions launched by Task Force K-BAR over the first six months of 2002.

Operations continued around the Khowst province throughout this period and on 4 January the first US Army soldier of the Afghan war to be killed by enemy fire died when his patrol was ambushed near the capital of the border province. SFC Nate Chapman, of the 1st Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group's special reconnaissance company had a dirt airfield outside Khowst named after him in honour of his sacrifice.

The US Marines at FOB Rhino and Kandahar airfield continued to remain on alert to provide support for operations around Tora Bora until 9 January 2002.

Bands of Afghan fighters were recruited throughout Afghanistan by US Army special forces teams to provide security and prevent a resurgence of the Taliban. (US Army)





A Marine CH-53E Super Stallion is refuelled in the air by a KC-130 Hercules while making a logistics re-supply run to an isolated detachment of US troops in Afghanistan's mountains. (USMC/CWO2 William D. Crow)

Australian signals intelligence working with their SAS contingent detected a Taliban force near Lashkar Gah in Helmand province, leading to a joint raid with US Marines being launched against the position on 2 January. Another SSE mission was launched with Task Force K-BAR on 10 January.

The winter weather proved a major hindrance to helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft movements all through the winter, leading to several operations being delayed or curtailed. A US Marine Corps Lockheed KC-130 Hercules aircraft was lost with all its seven crew when it flew into a mountain in Pakistan during bad weather.

In December, Task Force 58 received its first orders to set up a prison camp at FOB Rhino. Its first occupant was the American Taliban John Walker Lindh who had been captured at Mazar-e-Sharif. A bigger holding facility was built at Kandahar airfield and received its first prisoner on 21 December. Events in Pakistan would soon result in it being full sooner than expected.

The Pakistan military had launched a sweep of the border region after the Battle of Tora Bora in December and picked up more than 300 suspected Al Qaeda fighters. Many of them rioted and escaped from Parachinar prison before being re-captured. The US and Pakistani governments agreed to the prisoners being transferred to Kandahar. USAF MC-130s with US Marine guards on board made several flights to Kohat and Quetta in Pakistan to pick up more than 250 prisoners between 27 December 2001 and 6 January 2002.

Four days later the first of the prisoners were flown out of Kandahar on USAF Lockheed C-141 Starlifter transport en route to the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison camp. Hours before the airlift, the airbase's perimeter was attacked by several Taliban fighters and Bell AH.1W Cobra gunships were scrambled to track down and kill the attackers.

During the first three months of 2002, co-operation with President Pervez Musharraf's regime to run down Al Qaeda operatives hiding in Pakistan was at its height and soon more prisoners would be heading to Guantanamo. The CIA claimed it was able to capture more than two dozen senior Al Qaeda operatives in Pakistan in this period, including Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Before long, the CIA and Britain's Special Intelligence Service (SIS) was starting to wonder if all the prisoners handed over by the Pakistanis were as important as Islamabad claimed.

US intelligence continued to pin-point the Gardez area as a hotspot of Al Qaeda activity so a series of US operations were organized to try to flush out the enemy.

*US Army Military Police escort one of the first detainees to his cell in Camp X-Ray at the Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, on 11 January 2002.
(DoD/Petty Officer 1st Class Shane T. McCoy)*



US Army soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), scan the nearby ridgeline for enemy movement during Operation Anaconda in March

2002. (US Amy/ pc. David Marck Jr)

Task Force 58 received a warning order in early January to prepare to launch a major operation, in co-operation with the Australian SAS contingent and Task Force K-Bar, to find and destroy pockets of enemy fighters. The Australians drove north in their all-terrain vehicles and a platoon of US Marines flew up to Gardez to guard a CIA safe house, from where local militia forces were being trained and equipped. CENTCOM decided against launching the operation but the region would soon become the focus of the largest US conventional combat mission of the first phase of the Afghan war.

Task Force K-BAR's SEAL teams were then in action in Uruzgan province on 23 January, in a large raid against two Taliban compounds in the village of Hazar Qadam. The US military claimed 27 Taliban fighters were captured but 151 people were killed when AC-130 fire was called into action. This village was subsequently found to be closely linked with Afghan government leader Hamid Karzai and the incident attracted considerable negative publicity in the Afghan media. It was the taste of things to come when a string of incidents in which Afghan civilians were killed in US air strikes, alienating local opinion.

The Adi Ghar cave complex, some fourteen miles north of Spin Boldak, near the Pakistani border was swept by 300 troops of Task Force K-BAR in the last week of January. Some twelve caves were subsequently sealed by air strikes. The task force claimed eighteen enemy fighters were killed in fire fights during the operation, which culminated in US Army Apache gunships being called into action.

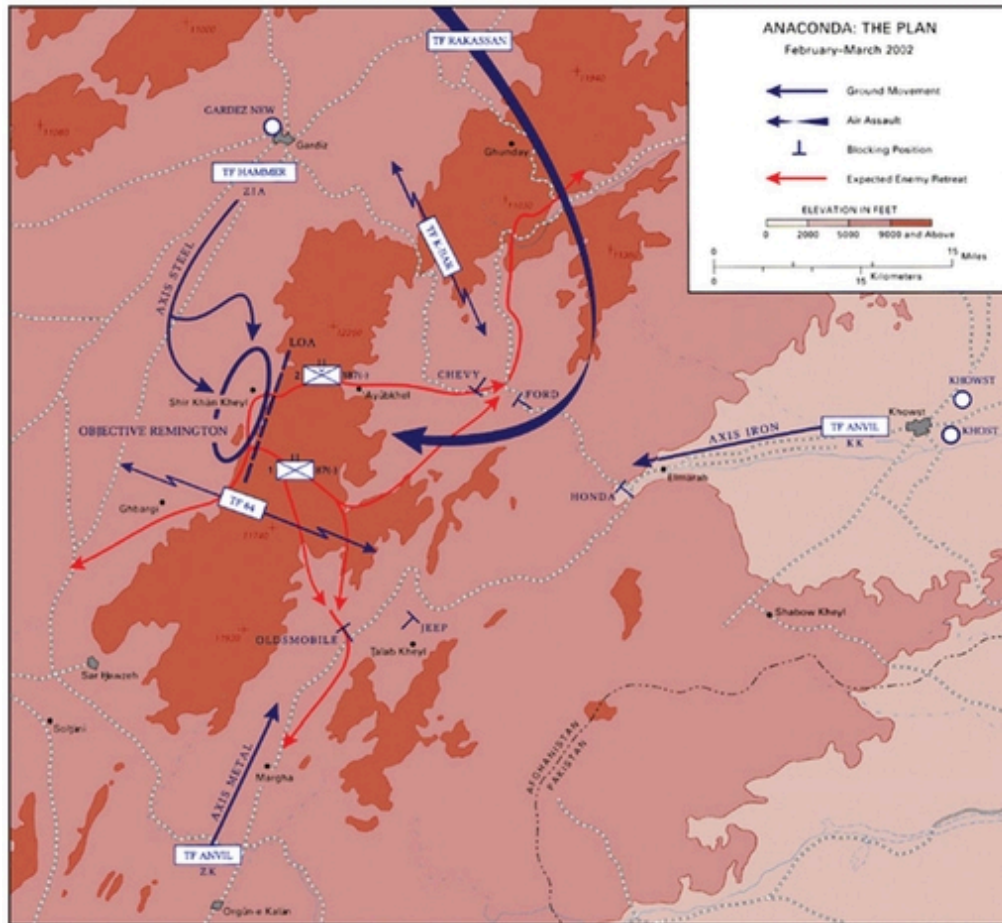
A Predator strike on the Zhawar Kili region on 4 February claimed to have killed several Al Qaeda leaders.

Back in southern Afghanistan, Task Force 58 was in the process of handing over security of the airfield to the 101st Airborne. FOB Rhino had been closed down and all US operations focused on Kandahar airfield. The 'Screaming Eagles' got their first taste of action on 15 February during a raid to capture a senior Taliban leader detected near Herat by USAF RQ-1 Predator drones. USAF MH-53Js, backed by AH-64A Apache gunships, of the US 101st Airborne carried an assault force of US Navy SEAL

commandos and Danish special forces troops on the successful mission that was launched within ninety minutes of the go-command. The raiders met little resistance and this became the norm for many operations at this time.

The remains of the MH-47 Chinook shot down on 'Roberts Ridge' during Operation Anaconda in March 2002. (US Army)





The plan for Operation Anaconda. (US Army)

During the first three months of 2002, the SSE operations on the fringes of the country were taking up a disproportionate amount of the troops, helicopters and other resources available to the US military. At the same time, senior US commanders and diplomats were becoming increasingly concerned that Afghanistan's politics, economy, infrastructure and medical facilities were still in crisis. The drift and confusion in US policy was beginning to be recognized by senior figures in the Bush administration.

Arguments about the direction of military and diplomatic policy in Afghanistan raged during the first month of 2002. In a National Security Council meeting in February 2002, the US special envoy for Afghanistan, James Dobbins, and his boss, Colin Powell, pushed for NATO's ISAF force to have its mandate expanded and for it to be allowed to move out of Kabul

to help with security and humanitarian operations through out the country, particularly to try to stop fighting breaking out between rival warlords.

Pentagon chief, Rumsfeld, was having none of it. He had no intention of allowing international forces to take on a bigger role. If they got into trouble, the US military would have to rescue them and co-ordination with US operations against Al Qaeda would be complicated. The existing 'light footprint' policy would remain. The only compromise was that Rumsfeld agreed that several billion dollars would be spent to rebuild the Afghan National Army, police and security services.

As US intelligence analysts got to work on all the leads their troops were collecting around Afghanistan, indications were growing that there was a large concentration of several hundred Al Qaeda fighters, including many senior commanders, in the Shah-i-Kot valley in Paktia province, near the mountainous border with Pakistan. CENTCOM chief, General Tommy Franks, decided that a large-scale offensive was needed to trap and destroy the enemy fighters. To avoid a repeat of the problems that had bedevilled the drive to trap bin Laden at Tora Bora in December 2001, the US military wanted US Army infantry troops to be involved in strength.

The plan, for what eventually became known as Operation Anaconda, was complex and involved several military organizations – US, Afghan and allied – that were operating under different chains of command in the same small piece of territory. Air power was central to the delivery of the assault and cordon forces, as well as providing supporting firepower. The operation soon went badly wrong and afterwards USAF and US Army commanders traded rhetorical blows about the poor performance of the air support.

Covert observation teams were first inserted onto three mountain peaks dominating the Shah-i-Kot valley to try to locate the Al Qaeda positions. Then a Afghan militia force, led by US Army Special Forces teams, was to launch a direct attack to drive the enemy fighters towards a cordon of US soldiers from the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain Divisions, who were to be simultaneously dropped by Chinook helicopters in the hills on the eastern side of the valley. Escaping Al Qaeda fighters would either be picked off in the open, as they escaped, by Apache attack helicopters, killed by fast jets called in by US forward air controllers or be caught by the guns of the US paratroopers.

The operation kicked off in the early hours of 2 March with the advance up the valley by the Afghan militia force. USAF B-1Bs were to strike a series of targets on H-Hour to keep the enemy occupied while the Afghan militia convoy moved into position. Further fire support was provided by an AC-130. Things started to go wrong almost immediately. The first B-1B over the valley to bomb pre-planned targets, including 12.5-mm Dshk heavy machine guns that were a grave threat to the in-bound CH-47 Chinooks carrying the paratroopers, suffered a technical fault after only six of its bombs had been released and had to call off its attack.

The next B-1Bs over the target area received an erroneous radio message to cease releasing weapons and did not drop all its bombs on their targets. A pair of F-15Es also ceased their attacks after hearing the same confused message.

Then disaster struck when a technical fault in the AC-130's navigation system led it to attack the Afghan militia convoy by mistake. Two militia fighters were killed and more than a dozen injured. Several of their US advisors were also wounded. The incident caused the militia attack to grind to a halt in confusion as the US medics tried to recover the wounded from wrecked trucks. It meant that the US troops soon to be dropped off in the mountains by waves of Chinooks would face a fully alerted and prepared enemy.

A CIA Mil Mi-17 helicopter drops wounded Afghan soldiers off at the airfield at Bagram airbase on 2 March, 2002. Doctors and nurses of the Army's 274th Forward Surgical Team and volunteer litter bearers took the wounded to their clinic for treatment. (USAF/MSgt Keith Reed)



Just as the ‘friendly fire’ incident was unfolding, US Army CH-47Ds were arriving at their landing zones to land hundreds of American soldiers. As they ran off the giant helicopters’ ramps they came under unrelenting fire from AK-47s, heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), mortars and light artillery. Fortunately, the Chinooks were escorted by five Apache from the 3rd Battalion, the 101st Aviation Regiment, which was soon duelling with Al Qaeda machine gun teams at ranges under 200 metres. The attack helicopter weaved across the battlefield to dodge heavy fire and re-position themselves to employ their guns, rockets and AGM-114 Hellfire missiles. The presence of the Apache overhead diverted the attention of many of the Al Qaeda gunners and allowed most of the American troops to take cover and begin returning fire. For the rest of the morning the Apache were in action over Shah-i-Kot but as each helicopter ran out of ammunition, they peeled off and returned to a forward arming and refuelling point (FARP) fifty miles away from the battlefield. All of the helicopters were riddled with bullet holes or peppered with RPG shrapnel. One of the Apache took a hit in the transmission and was rapidly losing oil. It landed within sight of the Al Qaeda fighters and with the enemy too close to risk staying in position until a rescue force arrived, the crew had to top up their helicopter’s transmission with oil. The helicopter started up and headed off for the FARP

while still leaking oil. The crew miraculously made it but by midday all the Apaches were at the FARP undergoing repairs. Only two were fit to go back into action later that afternoon to make repeated attack runs to stop an Al Qaeda attempt to overrun an exposed US position.

By dawn, the Shah-i-Kot was the scene of the most intense battle involving US forces since the infamous 'Blackhawk down' incident in Somalia in 1993. Hundreds of American troops were pinned down and frantic calls for close air support were filling the US radio nets. USAF B-52s, F-15Es and F-16Cs were marshalled over the battlefield to drop scores of JDAMs or laser-guided bombs, as well as make repeated cannon strafing runs when attacks were needed close to friendly positions. The small size of the battlefield meant the airspace was very congested and controllers on the orbiting USAF Boeing E-3 Sentry AWACS had a challenging time making sure all the attack runs were deconflicted and all the aircraft did not fly into each other or drop bombs on top of each other. There were several close shaves during this confused period.

However, the choreographing of these air strikes was confused and slow at times because of the complex and inflexible chain of command of the US forces. The problem revolved around the fact that the US infantry units were calling in air support over a different chain of command to the US special forces' observation posts that ringed the battlefield. There was not one single headquarters prioritizing requests for air support, so pilots would begin their attack runs and then be told to pull off to attack a higher-priority target by a different controller.

Even with this confusion, US aircraft were hitting the enemy hard and inflicting scores of casualties, according to US special forces' observers who were watching the battle unfold.

As night approached, the main responsibility for close air support fell to AC-130s, which circled above the main US troop positions. USAF and CIA Predator UAVs were also positioned over the battlefield to provide senior officers controlling the battle from Bagram, Masirah Island and back in the US with real-time video feeds.

Heavy fighting continued through the next day with the US aircraft and attack helicopters pounding Taliban positions with increasing accuracy as the aircrews became more familiar with the battlefield and became more

proficient at working with the US forward air controllers on the ground. The scene was now set for one of the most controversial incidents of the battle.

During a Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) mission, US Navy SEAL Commandos explore the entrance to one of seventy caves they discovered in the Zhawar Kili area. The caves and other above-ground complexes were subsequently destroyed either by US Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) personnel or through air strikes. (US Navy)





Afghan militia fighters man a Russian 82-mm recoilless rifle at a US Army base in March 2002. (USAF/SSgt Jeremy T. Lock)

Senior US special forces' officers on Masirah Island ordered that the personnel manning three observation post monitoring the battle be replaced by US Navy SEAL commandos. They insisted that this happen during the coming night and the only way this could be achieved was by helicopter. A pair of MH-47Es from the 160th Special Aviation Operations Regiment were loaded with one of the teams destined to occupy Takur Ghar peak, which dominated the Shah-i-Kot valley. As they approached the objective, an AC-130 flew ahead to check out the landing zone and reported it clear of enemy fighters. Just as helicopters approached the objective, the AC-130 was called away to provide cover for other US troops under attack elsewhere.

The MH-47E approached the landing zone and was raked with enemy machine gun and RPG fire. It shuddered under the weight of fire and one of the SEAL operatives, Petty Officer Neil Roberts, standing on the rear ramp waiting to disembark, was thrown off the helicopter. The pilot immediately aborted the landing and flew away to safety. When it was realized that one of the SEAL team was missing a rescue mission was ordered.

Again the complex special forces' chain of command hampered the effort to recover the missing American, with the new rescue force being ordered by a senior officer to operate on a different radio frequency to that being used by the observation posts monitoring the battle. The observations teams were now powerless to pass on any warnings about the presence of enemy fighters on the ridge. The rescue helicopter approached the same landing zone and this time managed to land its troops but was hit several times and was forced to make an emergency landing after limping away from the battlefield.

Now a third helicopter carrying additional rescue troops approached the battlefield but the changing of the radio frequencies meant it could not be alerted to the enemy positions overlooking the landing zone. This third Chinook was now severely damaged by enemy fire and this one could not escape from the killing zone and crashed close to the Al Qaeda positions. The survivors linked up with the first rescue force, who formed a desperate defensive perimeter. An AC-130 had provided protection for the beleaguered Americans during the night but as dawn approached it had to turn for its base after three man-portable surface-to-air missiles were fired at it. Evacuation was not possible during daylight and the US SEALs and Rangers on the Takur Ghar peak had to rely on a constant stream of F-15Es and F-16Cs making bombing and gun strafing runs to keep Al Qaeda fighters at bay until the night. Under cover of darkness, the trapped Americans found a route to safety further down the mountainside, where a rescue force was waiting to load them on to helicopters to fly them back to Bagram. Eight Americans died during the confused battle on Takur Ghar peak, which had now been re-named Roberts Ridge. (Roberts was never recovered. He was killed in a fierce firefight minutes after he fell off the helicopter and is now buried in the US.)

*A vehicle patrol from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) halts to observe possible enemy positions in southern Afghanistan in March 2002.
(US Army/ Spc. David Marck)*



US commanders were now aware that they faced determined and skilled opponents and moved quickly to step up their game. The convoluted special forces' chains of command were sorted out. An airspace management regime was put in place and more aircraft were drafted into the battle.

US Marine Corps Bell AH-1W Super Cobra gunships were flown to Bagram from amphibious ships sailing in the Arabian Gulf and sixteen more Apache from the 101st Airborne were airlifted from the division's home base in Kentucky.

Two US Navy aircraft carriers were ordered to take up station off Pakistan to support the battle. Perhaps most significantly, the USAF was ordered to deploy a squadron of Fairchild A-10A Warthogs to Bagram to fly close air-support missions. By basing the 'tank buster' jets inside Afghanistan, the USAF would be able to fly sustained close air support for US troops and not have to rely on air-to-air refuelling to get fast jets into Afghan airspace. This would significantly increase their time on station during intense fighting, such as Operation Anaconda.

The fighting in the Shah-i-Kot valley continued for almost another week after the Battle of Roberts Ridge. The US troops did not move from their

mountain-top positions but remained in place and choreographed wave after wave of US strike aircraft and attack helicopters onto targets in the valley below. At its peak more than 200 bombs a day were being dropped in a valley nine kilometres long and five kilometres wide. Eventually, a force of Afghan militia backed by tanks was mobilized to advance up the valley and this finally forced the Al Qaeda fighters to disperse. By the time the Afghan tanks rolled into the valley on 12 March, it was deserted. There were scores of wrecked machine guns, mortars and several abandoned artillery pieces, as well as fewer than 100 bodies of dead fighters. Although senior US commanders claimed 1,000 Al Qaeda fighters were killed, American soldiers who visited the battlefield immediately after the end of Operation Anaconda estimated some 300 enemy personnel died and a similar number escaped into the mountains to find sanctuary in Pakistan.

The ending of Operation Anaconda did not signify the end of the American hunt for Al Qaeda elements in eastern Afghanistan. Patrols and aerial surveillance were kept up in the lower Shah-i-Kot valley throughout March in response to persistent reports of an Al Qaeda presence. On 17 March, a SEAL Team from Task Force 11 was scrambled in three MH-47s and two MH-60 helicopters to intercept a group of Chechen fighters driving down a remote road in two pick-up trucks who had been identified by a Predator drone. The American troops landed to surround the vehicles and in the ensuing firefight seventeen of the Chechens were killed and two captured. Equipment taken from the bodies of dead US troops during Operation Anaconda was recovered from the prisoners.



This British RAF Chinook HC.2 helicopter assigned to the US Joint Special Operations Task Force at Bagram is taking part in a humanitarian mission outside the northern entrance to the Salang Tunnel and delivering food and fuel to civilians stranded by heavy snowfalls. (US Army)

The Zawar Khili Valley cave network in Khowst province was also raided again in late March and early April by a mixed force of US and British troops. The latter were part of the special force task force that had been in Bagram since November 2001 and this was one of several missions they had undertaken in conditions of great secrecy. The British troops were from 40 Commando Royal Marines and were supported by a mortar team from 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment. They were working with troops from 101st Airborne.

The UK – US force discovered documents, weapons and human bodies for examination by intelligence experts. They then blew up the caves, which contained bedrooms, jails and warehouses, after collecting five bin bags full of documents. Some of the caves were found to be reinforced with steel ceilings and concrete floors.

So six month on from 9/11, the US-led campaign in Afghanistan had settled into a routine of sorts. Regular sweeps were made through the countryside to follow up leads of Al Qaeda activity. US officers now talked about the Afghan campaign being characterized by ‘economy of effort’. The Global War on Terror seemed to have moved on. General Tommy Franks and his team at CENTCOM were already planning the invasion of Iraq.

In April 2002, General Franks and his team visited Britain and held a secret meeting at RAF Brize Norton with UK Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon and the Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, to discuss Middle East security issues and possible ways to ‘handle’ Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. In the minutes of the meeting recorded by one of Franks’ staff, a senior British military planner said the UK ‘did not see a long term permanent presence in Afghanistan’. While Franks told his hosts that ‘as the Afghan National Army grows in capability, it is expected that the US presence can be reduced’. The security situation was at such a level ‘that should allow the Afghan Interim Authority to manage internal and border security problems’. As far as London and Washington were concerned, the war in Afghanistan seemed to be over.

Chapter 14

A Flawed Victory?

By the time the winter snow was thawing in Afghanistan, America's armed forces and intelligence agencies could justifiably claim a famous victory. With only a few weeks of preparation, the United States had mustered the forces needed to roundly defeat the Taliban regime and drive it from power. In a matter of months Afghanistan had a new government, which was once again part of the international community. The small size of the US force involved – only 110 CIA officers and 350 US special forces operatives, along with 250 British special forces soldiers, entered Afghanistan during the first two months of the war – was also remarkable.

Kabul was liberated just five weeks after the start of the US bombing campaign and in another five weeks the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar had been captured. In the mountains of Tora Bora, Al Qaeda's hard-core fighters fought a bloody last stand but their leaders were able to escape.

The victory, however, was far from complete. Although the US was able to inflict heavy losses on Usama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC managed to escape to safety in Pakistan, with thousands of his most loyal followers. Likewise, Mullah Omar and the majority of the Taliban's senior leadership also escaped America's dragnet. The escape of America's most implacable enemies came back to haunt the world's only superpower, when they were able to re-build their forces to strike at the US-backed regime in Kabul in 2006. It would be almost a decade until the US was able to finally track down bin Laden to a hide-out in northeastern Pakistan.

When the US Air Force and US Navy opened Operation Enduring Freedom on 7 October, victory was by no means certain. The US and its

allies had little understanding of Afghanistan, its 20 million people, the ruling Taliban regime or the enemy hiding among the Central Asian country's population. America's political leadership and senior military commanders all feared that the enterprise could end in the US being seen as an occupier and sharing the fate of British and Russian military expeditions into Afghanistan. When Operation Enduring Freedom began, the best expectation of the Pentagon and the CIA was that it would be several months of hard and bloody fighting to remove the Taliban from power.



*Five years on from the intervention by US forces in the autumn of 2001, heavy fighting erupted between NATO troops and Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan. Canadian troops launched Operation Medusa in September 2006 to clear the Panjwaii District of Kandahar province.
(CMND/Sgt Lou Penney)*

In barely two months of war the Taliban regime collapsed and bin Laden was on the run. The reasons for the rapid implosion of Mullah Omar's armed forces and government are varied. First of all, by 2001, the Taliban had overextended itself militarily and became dependent on tribal fighters to fill out the ranks of its army. These fighters and their leaders had mixed loyalties and were open to persuasion to switch horses and join the Americans.

This weakness was correctly identified by several important CIA leaders who were crucially able to influence the development of US war plans. When the American attack unfolded, it was finely tuned and focused on exploiting this weakness. They drove a wedge into the Taliban's weak spot and then ruthlessly exploited it in their drive for victory.

The CIA was in a position to be able to understand the human and tribal landscape of Afghanistan because it had devoted considerable effort to keeping in touch with Afghanistan's anti-Taliban forces during the late 1990s. When the time came, the CIA had several dozen operatives who spoke local languages and who had personal relationships with the key players in Afghanistan. In particular, they knew what motivated Afghanistan's warlords and tribal leaders, and, crucially, how much cash to offer them to win their loyalty.

Many in Washington under-estimated the degree to which the opponents of the Taliban would be willing accomplices. The Northern Alliance and many Pashtun tribes could see that the Taliban were facing the world's superpower and wanted to move quickly to benefit from the spoils of victory. Rather than wait as they cautiously built up their forces, the anti-Taliban commanders wanted to attack as soon as possible to generate the momentum needed to peel away fighters from the ranks of the enemy. Afghanistan's warlords understood the dynamics of tribal warfare and the importance of creating an impression of the inevitability of defeat as a means of making foot soldiers of wavering loyalty jump ship to the winning side.

The US military was able to bolt itself onto the CIA's covert 'influence' operation and deliver precision firepower at key moments to destroy important Taliban positions and reassure opposition leaders and soldiers that they had backed the winning side. US air power acquired near mythical status during the first weeks of the campaign when, time and time again, US bombers appeared overhead and delivered bombs with pin-point accuracy on Taliban bunkers, tanks, artillery pieces and command posts. This instilled

fear in the ranks of the Taliban and inspired opposition troops to rise out of their trenches to charge forward.

Senior CIA officials reported that during the first six months of the campaign between 5,000 and 10,000 Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters were killed or wounded. A further 5,000 were captured. Tens of thousands of Taliban fighters switched sides to join opposition groups. The CIA estimated that 25 per cent of the Taliban and Al Qaeda senior leaders were killed or captured. Several hundred Al Qaeda leaders and fighters who fled to Pakistan were apprehended in the first half of 2002 and handed over to the US. More than 20 Al Qaeda bases and camps were seized and exploited for intelligence information on the organization's operations in Afghanistan and around the world. The Pakistani analyst Ahmed Rashid estimated that the Taliban lost some 8,000 to 12,000 men or 20 per cent of their total force, and twice that number were wounded, as well as 7,000 taken prisoner. If his figures are correct, then nearly 50 per cent of the Taliban army was killed or wounded, which is an unprecedented level of casualties. Almost all these were lost in air strikes. Yet by end of March 2002, the US and its allies had suffered fewer than 50 fatalities.

In the aftermath of this victory, the leaders of the US military effort, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks, have been criticized for allowing Al Qaeda and the Taliban's leaders to escape.

Senior CIA, US and British special forces operatives have levelled detailed criticism of Rumsfeld and Franks for not committing enough troops and resources to closing the net on bin Laden at Tora Bora. Only a week or so earlier, the senior leadership of the Taliban was able to escape from Kandahar because fewer than 2,000 tribal fighters, 250 US Marines and 50 Australian SAS men were committed to encircle a city of 400,000 people containing several thousand Taliban fighters. It is not surprising that Mullah Omar and almost all the Taliban leadership were able to slip away.

*On 3 November 2002, local villagers wait in line for free medical care provided by the Coalition medical team of Bagram airfield in Afghanistan.
(US Army/Sgt Albert Eaddy)*



New recruits to the Afghan National Army practise saluting after they are issued new uniforms and equipment in May 2002. The new army was meant

to replace the militia forces of Afghanistan's warlords. (US Army/Sgt Kevin P. Bell)

Rumsfeld and Franks were both proponents of the view that America needed to avoid the commitment of large conventional land forces into Afghanistan, fearing it was the start of slippery slope that would lead to a Vietnam-style quagmire and defeat. There is also a suspicion that they were holding back from committing troops in order to save them for the coming war in Iraq.

Their insistence that NATO-led ISAF peacekeeping forces be restricted to Kabul was an extension of the 'light footprint' doctrine but it perhaps had greater and more negative impact than the escape of bin Laden and Mullah Omar. The limitations imposed by Rumsfeld on ISAF operations hamstrung international efforts to bring security, humanitarian aid, reconstruction and economic development to Afghanistan. In the crucial winter of 2001 – 2002 and for much of the following two years, NATO deployed only 5,000 troops to Kabul. Yet at the same time, 40,000 alliance troops were patrolling the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, which only had a population of 1.6 million people. Afghanistan's 20 million war-weary population saw little of the billions of dollars in promised international aid in the vital months after the defeat of the Taliban.



The view from a US Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter graphically illustrates Afghanistan's dramatic terrain. (USAF/SSgt Cherie A. Thurlby)

NATO armies had plenty of experience of peacekeeping missions and their presence throughout Afghanistan might have filled the security, humanitarian and development vacuum during the first months of 2002 that crucially hamstrung efforts to rebuild the country. With a weak central government and a minimal international presence, Afghans around the country continued to look to their tribal leaders and warlords for security and much more.

Rumsfeld's disdain for the ISAF and its 'nation building mission' was palpable and the UK Chief of Defence Staff in 2001 and 2002, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, has criticized the US Defense Secretary for his 'Wild West Posse' approach to Afghanistan and his concentration on the hunt for Al Qaeda remnants at the expense of almost every aspect of the international involvement in the country. Large numbers of US troops and military resources were not committed to humanitarian, peacekeeping and other activities that might have brought Afghanistan out of the shadow of thirty years of war and devastation. The level of resources and diplomatic attention committed to rebuilding Afghanistan in 2002 was just inadequate and nowhere near the scale needed to address the country's problems, said the Admiral.

Ten years on from the setting up of its first temporary prisoner holding facility at Kandahar airfield in December 2001, the US military still runs a large prison camp at Bagram airbase to hold Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners. (USMC/Sgt Joseph R. Chenelly)



This meant Afghanistan's new government in the spring of 2002 was fatally weakened even before it had been formed. Some senior western military figures and diplomats who were in Kabul at this time are loath even to consider that Karzai was ever in charge of his 'government'. Five years on the weakness and corruption of Hamid Karzai's government was cited by many seasoned observers of Afghan affairs as a key reason for the outbreak of a new insurgency across much of the south and east of the country.

In May 2002, a Canadian task force was helicoptered up to the Tora Bora cave complex to conduct forensic examinations of abandoned Al Qaeda bases to try to confirm if Usama bin Laden died in the battle the previous December. No evidence of his death was found. (US Army)



Afghanistan remains one of the world's largest producers of poppy plants, which fuels the global heroin trade. (USAF/SSgt Jeremy T. Lock)

This created the environment that Mullah Omar and bin Laden were able to exploit in 2006 to help start the insurgency that has embroiled NATO-led forces in a bloody war that cost the alliance more than 2,000 fatalities. This is perhaps the biggest legacy of the flawed America's victory in 2001.

Rumsfeld and Franks pursued the same 'light footprint' approach in the aftermath of the US 'victory' in Iraq in April 2003. Within weeks Iraq was engulfed in a bloody insurgency that cost tens of thousands of lives. The 'slow burn' of the situation in Afghanistan meant that the country's problems had yet to go critical by the time American tanks rolled into Baghdad. So in the run up to the invasion of Iraq, the proponents of the 'light footprint' were still lauded for the 'success' of the Afghan venture. Rumsfeld used the example of Afghanistan to browbeat and eventually sack the head of the US Army in 2003, General Eric Shinseki, when he pushed for more troops to be sent to occupy Iraq. The controversial Defense Secretary got his way and the 'light footprint' strategy was repeated in Iraq with disastrous results, although this became apparent more quickly than in Afghanistan.

The lack of any plan to re-build Afghanistan and its government is also held up as another similarity with the US war in Iraq. However, in Afghanistan the Americans at least have the defence that their war was launched with no notice in response to an attack on their homeland. The Americans had to plan, organize and launch their attack in a matter of weeks so it is understandable that many aspects of their campaign had the feel of being improvised at the last minute. The whole Afghan campaign had the feel of uncharted territory in the first weeks after 9/11. This is very different from the Iraq campaign in 2003, which was preceded by over a year of deliberate and meticulous planning related to almost every aspect, except post-war security and the rebuilding of the Iraqi state. Afghanistan in 2001 was the war no one in the US was expecting so it is no surprise that the response was imperfect.

The US campaign provided an interesting insight into the application of modern information technology and internet-era communications to military affairs. It produced an odd swing from obsessive micro-management from Washington of a few dozen US soldiers in Afghanistan in the first few weeks of the war to the total opposite less than two months later. In the last weeks of November as events gathered momentum, the ability of US policy makers in Washington to direct events by the hour just slipped away as they were

overloaded with information through multiple sources. It was time to let the men on the ground run the show.

America's Operation Enduring Freedom was also the source of many unexpected consequences. This is not surprising given the urgency of the need to respond to the 9/11 attacks. The overriding need was to strike back at Al Qaeda and the consequences were not really considered.

Perhaps the most significant is the US-run prison camp at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. In early 2011 some 250 inmates were still held in legal limbo in the camp. The need to find somewhere to hold the several hundreds of Al Qaeda and senior Taliban prisoners captured in Afghanistan first led to the infamous camp being opened and it subsequently was home to these prisoners. The camp became an international cause célèbre as soon as the Pentagon released the first images of blindfolded prisoners in orange jump suits after their transfer from Kandahar in January 2002. The insistence of President Bush and Rumsfeld that these prisoners be categorized as 'enemy combatants' and subject to US military law created international controversy that seriously damaged the reputation of the US around the world. When the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal in Iraq broke in late 2003, there was little sympathy or support for the US because of the precedent of Guantanamo Bay.

The nature of the defeat of the Taliban also had major implications for the future of Afghanistan. Its leaders were never captured. They just walked out of their offices in Kandahar in the first week of December 2001 and simply returned to their villages or crossed the border into Pakistan. There was no formal surrender of the Taliban regime or its armed forces. They, in effect, became Afghanistan's 'shadow' or 'underground government' that was able to bide its time before launching a new insurgency.

While the CIA won praise for its ability to bribe and cajole Afghan tribal leaders and warlords to turn against the Taliban, it was also very obvious that Afghanistan's leaders were more than able to turn the table on the Americans. They were backing the Americans because it suited their interests and they saw the possibility of using US support to enhance their political position, military strength and personnel wealth. When the US agenda did not suit their interests – such as the US demarche to the Northern Alliance not to take Kabul – they were more than willing to ignore the orders

of Washington. America had great influence in Afghanistan but its power had limits.

Former US Vice President Dick Cheney and Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai during a joint press conference outside the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan. Karzai remains in his post but Cheney stood down in January 2009 after the election of Barack Obama. (DoD/MSgt James M. Bowman)



The co-operation of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf during the months after 9/11 impressed President Bush and many in Washington. When the Pakistanis started to hand over a string of top Al Qaeda operatives in early 2002, it added to this impression. Many US and British intelligence operatives would soon begin to believe that Musharraf was ‘playing’ the Americans and just giving them enough ‘meat’ to keep them happy, while allowing the leadership of the Taliban to take up residence, unmolested, in Quetta. The Pakistani President was obviously keeping his options open.

The fate of many of the key players in the 2001 campaign provides some useful insights. On the American side many of the participants subsequently rose to higher command. General Tommy Franks most famously went on to lead the US invasion of Iraq. Colonel John Mullholland and Rear Admiral Bert Calland, who led the insertion of US troops into northern Afghanistan both subsequently rose to senior positions in the US special forces.

Major General 'Buster' Hagenbeck, who was in charge of Operation Anaconda, never led US troops in the field again, being promoted 'sideways' to being a lieutenant general on the staff of the head of the US Army and commandant of West Point Military Academy. Major General Dell Dailey, the controversial head of Task Force Sword, also found his promotion route diverted away from the command of combat troops to anti-terrorist roles in military headquarters and the US State Department.

Senior CIA intelligence officials and operatives involved in the campaign suffered an equally mixed fate. The CIA had a 'good war' in Afghanistan in 2001 and its credibility with President Bush and other senior politicians in Washington was sky high in the months after the fall of Kabul. The Agency's influence over many aspects of US foreign policy – from the 'extra-ordinary rendition' of prisoners to the claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – was immense during 2002 and into 2003, with very mixed results. CIA Director George Tenet was criticized by the 9/11 Commission for failings before the attacks on Washington and New York but his credibility was fatally shot by his claim that Iraq having weapons of mass destruction was a 'slam dunk'. His key lieutenant, Cofer Black, played a key role in the extraordinary rendition operation that filled Guantanamo Bay with suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban prisoners. He resigned from the CIA in 2005 and joined the controversial private security company Blackwater. Hank Crumpton fared better and has been described as a 'genuine American hero' for his role in developing the plan of the Afghan campaign and eventually was appointed the State Department Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism with the very public rank of ambassador. Gary Berntsen, who led the first CIA team into Kabul and clashed with General Franks over the failure to capture bin Laden at Tora Bora, had his attempt to publish his memoirs heavily censored by the CIA. He eventually stood as a candidate for the US Senate in 2010 but lost.



Airmen from the US Air Force Honor Guard carry the casket of Senior Airman Jason Cunningham to his final resting place at Arlington National Cemetery on 14 March 2002. Cunningham, a pararescueman, was killed in action on 4 March 2002 during Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. By the start of 2011 some 1,450 US and more than 800 coalition soldiers had been killed in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of Afghans have died in the past decade's fighting. (USAF/TSgt Mark D. Smith)

America's allies in Afghanistan prospered as well. Hamid Karzai was elected President of Afghanistan and remained in his post in 2011, although his credibility was severely damaged by allegations of corruption and the involvement of his family in heroin smuggling. He continued to be dogged by accusations that he had little control over his country and is a foreign puppet.

General Mohammed Fahim, the senior commander of the Northern Alliance, served as Afghan defence minister until 2004 when Karzai appointed him as a marshal, the highest rank in the country's army, for life.

Rumours of involvement in organized crime meant Karzai kept him at arms length until 2010 when he was appointed as vice president, leading to accusations that the President was relying heavily on the old warlords.

Karzai's old rival for power in Kandahar, Gul Agha Sherzai, was eventually removed from power in the southern city after accusations of involvement in the illegal drugs trade became public. Karzai was not prepared to lose his key ally and he was appointed governor of Nangarhar Province in 2004, and seven years later was still in his post, surviving at least one Taliban assassination attempt.

The most famous Afghan warlord, General Rashid Dostum, initially prospered in the post Taliban era, rising to be Commander in Chief of the Afghan Armed Forces in 2005. He was disgraced after a violent incident involving a rival militia in 2008 and briefly went into exile in Turkey. He returned to Kabul in 2009 to back Karzai's election campaign and has since been back in favour with the President. Dostum's presence in Kabul was clear evidence that his government was still heavily dependent on warlords to stay in power.

A decade on from the start of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, the country is still blighted by war as a new generation of Taliban insurgents have emerged to challenge Karzai and his international backers. While the tactics needed to fight the Taliban in 2011 are obviously different from those used a decade ago, there is one crucial lesson that remains valid. In 2001, the CIA created a strategy to influence opinion across Afghanistan to create the impression that the US was riding an irresistible wave and that Afghans should join it or risk being on the losing side. In 2011, the momentum appears to have gone from the US and international community's cause.

Sources

This book has been largely possible due to the many participants in the tumultuous events in Afghanistan in 2001 and early 2002 who have provided their time and experience to help me piece together the complex and confused situation.

By the very nature of the conflict, many of the participants who still work for intelligence agencies and special forces organizations wish their assistance to go unmentioned.

A particular thanks must go Lord Boyce, the former UK Chief of Defence Staff, who talked freely about Afghanistan in 2001, Jonny Crook who read several chapters and provided important insights and Marc Lee of City Forum Limited who introduced me to several important ‘players’ from 2001.

Books

Mir Bahmanyar, Afghanistan Cave Complexes 1979 – 2004 (Osprey)

Pete Blaber, The Mission, The Men, and Me (Berkley Caliber)

Tony Blair, A Journey (Random House)

Peter Bergen, Holy War Inc (Orion)

Gary Berntsen and Ralph Pezzullo, Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda (Three Rivers Press)

Joseph Bernstein, AH-64 Units of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (Osprey)

Patrick Bishop, 3 Para and Ground Truth (Harper Collins)

Eric Blehm, The Only Thing Worth Dying For (Harper Collins)

Charles H. Briscoe, Richard L. Kiper, James A. Schroder, Kalev I. Sepp, US Army Special Operations in Afghanistan (Paladin Press)

George W. Bush, Decision Points (Virgin)

Alistair Campbell, The Blair Years (Hutchinson)

Richard A. Clarke, Against All Enemies (Free Press)

Jane Corbin, The Base (Simon & Shuster)

Steve Davies, F-15E Strike Eagle Units in Combat 1990 to 2005 (Osprey)

Michael DeLong, Inside CentCom (Regnery)

James Fergusson, A Million Bullets (Bantam Press)

Tommy Franks, American Soldier (Regan Books)

Dalton Fury, Kill bin Laden (St Martin's Griffin)

Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, Cobra II (Atlantic Books)

Stephen Grey, Operation Snakebite (Penguin)

Tony Holmes, F-14 Tomcat Units of Enduring Freedom (Osprey)

Seth G. Jones, In the Graveyard of Empires (Norton)

Richard Kemp and Chris Hughes, Attack State Red (Penguin)

Benjamin S. Lambeth, Air Power Against Terror (RAND)

Damien Lewis, Bloody Heroes (Arrow)

Ed Macy, Apache and Hellfire (Harper Collins)

Robin Moore, Task Force Dagger (MacMillan)

Richard Myers, Eyes on the Horizon (Threshold Editions)

Sean Naylor, Not a Good Day to Die (Penguin)

Leigh Neville, Special Forces Operations in Afghanistan (Osprey)

Mark Nicol, Ultimate Risk (MacMillan)

Jonathan Powell, The New Machiavelli (Bodley Head)

Ahmed Rashid, Taliban (Pan)

David Reynolds, The Battle for Helmand (Pegasus Publications)

Tim Ripley, 16 Air Assault Brigade (Pen & Sword)

Tim Ripley, Middle East Airpower in 21st Century (Pen & Sword)
Rowan Scarborough, Rumsfeld's War (Regnery)
Gary C. Schroen, First In (Ballantine Books)
John Simpson, News from No Man's Land (Macmillan)
Jenniffer Sims and Burton Gerber, Transforming US Intelligence
(Georgetown University)
Michael Smith, Killer Elite (Weidenfeld & Nicholson)
Doug Stanton, Horse Soldiers (Simon & Shuster)
George Tenet, At the Center of the Storm (Harper Collins)
Robert S. Tripp, Kristin F. Lynch, John G. Drew, and Edward W. Chan,
Supporting Air and Space Expeditionary Forces: Lessons from Operation
Enduring Freedom (RAND)
Bob Woodward, Bush at War (Simon & Shuster)
Bob Woodward, Obama's War (Simon & Shuster)
Thomas Withington, B-1 Lancer Units in Combat (Osprey)
Various, Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil (Reuters)
Vol 4 International Air Power Journal (Air Time Publishing)

Magazines

Winter 2001, Spring and Summer 2002 issue The Hook
Various issues: Air Forces Monthly, Air Force, Air International, Aviation &
Space Technology Week, Combat Aircraft, Code One Magazine, Defense
News, Flight International, The Globe & Laurel, Jane's Defence Weekly,
Jane's International Defence Review, Jane's Intelligence Review, Jane's
Sentinel, Pegasus, RUSI Journal.

Internet Websites

www.googleearth.com
www.globesecurity.org
www.scramble.nl
www.hrw.org

www.defenselink.mil

www.af.mil

www.mod.uk

www.zianet.com/tedmorris/dg/ppdrdg.html/ Bomber Operations Diego Garcia, 28TH AND 40TH AEFs OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM & OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, 14 September 2001 through 15 August 2006

Official Documents and Reports

‘Operation Enduring Freedom Lessons Learned’, Colonel Bruce Burda USAFSOC, 1 February 2003

‘Command and Control of Special Operations Forces for 21st Century Contingency Operations’, Major Denis P. Doty, USAF, Naval War College, Newport, R.I.

‘American Carrier Air Power at the Dawn of New Century’, Benjamin S. Lambeth, RAND

‘Ground-Aided Precision Strike Heavy Bomber Activity in Operation Enduring Freedom’, Lieutenant Colonel Eric E. Theisen, USAF, US Air War College Maxwell Paper No. 31

‘The Evolution of the Joint ATO Cycle’, Major Robert P. Winkler, USAF, Joint Advanced Warfighter School

‘A Different Kind of War, The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001 – September 2005’, Donald P. Wright, PhD, James R. Bird, Steven E. Clay, Peter W. Connors, Lieutenant Colonel Scott C. Farquhar, Lynne Chandler Garcia, Dennis F. Van Wey (Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS)

‘9/11 Report’, 9/11 Commission

‘Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed to Get Bin Laden and Why it Matters Today’, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 30 November 2009

Unclassified Documents from Marine Task Force 58’s Operations in Afghanistan, Task Force 58

“‘Troops in Contact’ Air strikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan’, Human Rights Watch, September 2008

‘Operation Anaconda, An Airpower Perspective’, HQ USAF 2005

‘The United States Army in Afghanistan Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001 – March 2003’ (US Army Center for Military History)

‘Executive Summary of the Battle of Takur Ghar’, US Department of Defense, May 24, 2002

‘USSOCOM 20th Anniversary History’, US Special Operations Command, 2007

‘Post Operational Tour Report Op Fingal’, 16 Air Assault Brigade.

Glossary of Terms

AAC:	Army Air Corps (British Army)
AB:	Airbase
ACW:	Air Control Wing (USAF)
AEW:	Air Expeditionary Wing (USAF)
AEG:	Air Expeditionary Group (USAF)
AG:	Air Group (USAF)
AIA:	Afghan Interim Authority
AMW:	Air Mobility Wing (USAF)
ANA:	Afghan National Army
ANAAAC:	Afghan National Army Air Corps
ANG:	Air National Guard (US)
AOR:	Area of Responsibility
ARG:	Air Refueling (USAF)
ARS:	Air Refueling Squadron (USAF)
ARW:	Air Refueling Wing (USAF)
AS:	Airlift Squadron (USAF)
ASTOR:	Airborne Stand Off Radar (UK)
Avn:	Aviation (US Army)
AW:	Airlift Wing (USAF)
AWACS:	Airborne Warning and Control System
Bn:	Battalion
BS:	Bombardment Squadron (USAF)
BW:	Bombardment Wing (USAF)

CAB:	Combat Aviation Brigade (US Army)
CAOC:	Combined Air Operations Centre (USAF)
CIA:	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
CFACC:	Coalition Forces Air Component Commanders (US)
CFACC:	Coalition Forces Land Component Commanders (US)
CMND:	Canadian Ministry of National Defence
CRG:	Contingency Response Group (USAF)
CSAR:	Combat Search and Rescue
Det:	Detachment
EAW:	Expeditionary Air Wing (UK)
EARS:	Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron (USAF)
EBS:	Expeditionary Bombardment Squadron (USAF)
ECS:	Electronic Combat Squadron (USAF)
EFS:	Expeditionary Fighter Squadron (USAF)
EAS:	Expeditionary Airlift Squadron (USAF)
ERS	Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron (USAF)
ERQS:	Expeditionary Rescue Squadron (USAF)
EBS:	Expeditionary Bomber Squadron (USAF)
EACCS:	Expeditionary Airborne Command and Control Squadron (USAF)
ELINT:	Electronic intelligence
EOG:	Expeditionary Operations Group (USAF)
FAC:	Forward Air Controller
FARP:	Forward Arming and Refueling Point:
Flt:	Flight
FG:	Fighter Group (USAF)
FS:	Fighter Squadron (USAF)
FOB:	Forward Operating Base
FW:	Fighter Wing (USAF)
GBU:	Guided bomb unit
HARM:	High Speed Anti-Radiation Missile
HC:	US Navy Helicopter Support Squadron

HCS:	US Navy Helicopter Combat Support Squadron
HMLA:	US Marine Helicopter Attack Squadron, Light
HMH:	US Marine Helicopter Squadron, Heavy
HMM:	US Marine Helicopter Squadron, Medium
HS:	US Navy Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron
HVM:	High Velocity Missile (UK SAM)
IADS:	Integrated air defence system
ISAF:	International Security Assistance Force (NATO)
ISI:	Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)
JHF(A):	Joint Helicopter Force (Afghanistan) (UK)
JSFAW:	Joint Special Forces Aviation Wing (UK)
JSOTF:	Joint Special Operations Task Force
JSOAC:	Joint Special Operations Air Component
JTAC:	Joint Terminal Attack Controller (US)
LTW:	Lynham Transport Wing (RAF)
MAW:	Marine Air Wing (USMC)
MEB:	Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB)
MEF:	Marine Expeditionary Force (USMC)
MEU:	Marine Expeditionary Unit (USMC)
NA:	Northern Alliance
NAEFW:	NATO Airborne Early Warning Force
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NAS:	Naval Air Squadron (UK)
NSA:	National Security Agency (US)
ODA:	Operational Detachment Alpha (US SF)
PAF:	Pakistani Air Force
RA:	Royal Artillery
RAF:	Royal Air Force (UK)
RAAF:	Royal Australian Air Force
Regt:	Regiment
RS:	Reconnaissance Squadron (ERS: Expeditionary RS) (USAF)

RW:	Reconnaissance Wing (USAF)
RQS:	Rescue Squadron (USAF)
RQW:	Rescue Wing (USAF)
SAM:	Surface-to-air missile
SAS:	Special Air Service (UK and Australia)
SEAD:	Suppression of enemy air defence
SEAL:	SEa, Air, and Land Team (US Navy)
SLAM:	Stand-off land attack missile
SOAR:	Special Operation Aviation Regiment (US Army)
SOF:	Special Operations Forces (US Army)
SOG:	Special Operations Group (USAF)
SOS:	Special Operations Squadron (USAF)
SOW:	Special Operations Wing: (USAF)
Sqn:	Squadron
TACP:	Tactical air control party
TDY:	Temporary duty (US military term)
TF:	task force
TLAM:	Tomahawk Land Attack Missile
USAF:	US Air Force
USMC:	US Marine Corps
USN:	US Navy
UN:	United Nations
USAF:	United States Air Force
USS:	United States Ship
VA:	US Navy Attack Squadron
VAQ:	US Navy Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron
VAW:	US Navy Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron
VF:	US Navy Fighter Squadron
VFA:	US Navy Strike Fighter Squadron
VMA:	US Marine Attack Squadron
VMAQ:	US Marine Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron
VFMA(AW):	US Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron

VFMA:	US Marine Fighter Attack Squadron
VMGR:	US Marine Refuelling Squadron
VMM:	Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron
VMU:	US Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle unit
VP:	US Navy Patrol Squadron
VS:	US Navy Antisubmarine Squadron
VQ:	US Navy Fleet Reconnaissance Squadron

Index

People

UK

Prime Minister Tony Blair

Lieutenant Colonel Ed Butler

Admiral Sir Mike Boyce

Secretary of Defence Geoff Hoon

Brigadier Graeme Lamb

Major General John McColl

Brigadier Barney White-Spunner

United States Government

Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage

President George W. Bush

Vice President Dick Cheney

Ambassador James Dobbins

Secretary of State Colin Powell

National Security Advisor Condi Rice

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

US CIA

Gary Berntsen

Cofer Black

Hank Crumpton

Bob Grenier

Gary Schroen
CIA Director George Tenet

US Army
Major General Dell Dailey
General Tommy Franks
Major General Buster Hagenbeck
Colonel John Mullholland

USAF
General Dick Myers
Brigadier Gregory Trebon
Lieutenant General Chuck Wald

USMC
Brigadier General James Mattis
US Navy
Rear Admiral Bert Calland
PO Neil Roberts

Afghan Political and Military Leaders
Abdul Rashin Dostum
General Bariullah
General Bismullah Khan
Commander Daoud Khan
General Mohammed Qassim Fahim
Ahmad Shah Massoud
General Atta Mohammed
Dr Karim Khalili
Ismail Khan
Hamid Karzai
‘Gul Agha Sherzai

Al Qaeda and Taliban Leaders
Mohammed Atef
Mullah Faisal
Mullah Osmani
Mullah Omar

Mullah Naqeebullah
Usama bin Laden (UBL)
Abu Zubaydah

Other Government Leaders
President Uzbekistan, Islom Karimov
General Mahmood Ahmed Head of Pakistani ISI
Perez Musharraf, President of Pakistan

Others
Lakhdar Brahimi
Seymour Hersh

Places
Afghanistan
Bagram
Bamiyan
Dari-e-Balkh Valley
Dari-a-Souf valley
FOB Rhino
Gardez
Herat
Jalalabad
Kandahar Airfield
Khowst
Konduz
Mazar-e-Sharif
Pansjhir Valley
Shah-i-kot
Shomali Plain
Spin Boldak
Tarin Kowt
Takur Ghar
Tora Bora
Uruzgan
Zawar Khili

Central Asia

Dusanbe, Tajikistan
Karshi-Kanabad (K2), Uzbekistan
Manas, Kyrgyzstan

Pakistan
Dalbandin, Pakistan
Jacobabad, Pakistan
Quetta , Pakistan
Pasni, Pakistan
Shamsi, Pakistan

Middle East
Al Dhafra, UAE
Al Jaber, Kuwait
Al Udeid, Qatar
Diego Garcia, BIOT
Incirlik AB, Turkey
Muharraq, Bahrain
Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia
Masirah, Oman
Seeb, Oman
Thumrait, Oman

Europe
Bonn, Germany
Ramstein, Germany
USA
Guantanamo Bay
Langley
New York
Tampa, Florida

Organisations/Units
UK Units
40 Commando Royal Marines
16 Air Assault Brigade
3 Commando Brigade
1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

Special Air Service (SAS)

Special Boat Service (SBS)

7 Squadron, RAF

47 Squadron RAF

UK SIS (MI6)

UK Ships

HMS Fearless

HMS Illustrious

HMS Triumph

HMS Trafalgar

US Army and Special Forces Units

Advance Force Operations(AFO)

101st Airborne Division

Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force

Delta Force

Joint Special Operations Command ((JSOC)

Joint Special Operations Air Component(JSOAC)

10th Mountain Division

Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA)

ODA 534

ODA 553

ODA 554

ODA 555

ODA 572

ODA 574

ODA 583

ODA 585

ODA 586

ODA 594

ODA 595

75th Ranger Regiment

160th SOAR, US Army

5th Special Forces Group

Task Force

Task Force Bowie

Task Force Dagger

Task Force K-Bar

Task Force Sword

US Navy SEALs

US Marine Corps

15th MEU (SOC)

12th MEU (SOC)

Task Force

US Ships

USS Baatan

USS Carl Vinson

USS Enterprise

USS Kitty Hawk

USS Peleliu

USS Theodore Roosevelt

CIA

CIA Liaison Teams

Alpha

Delta

Echo

Jawbreaker

Juliet

Counter-Terrorism Centre

Non US Organisations

1 Squadron, Australian SAS Regiment

Canadian Joint Task Force

Danish Hunter and Frogmen Corps

German KSK

Kabul Multi-National Brigade

Jordanian Special Forces Detachment

New Zealand 1 SAS Group

Norwegian Special Forces

Operations

Afghan Eyes

Anaconda
Oracle
Southern Watch
Trent
Veritas

Equipment
Aircraft
Boeing B-52 Stratofortress
Boeing C-17 Globemaster
Boeing E-3 AWACS
Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker
Boeing RC-135 Rivet Joint
English Electric Canberra PR9
Fairchild A-10A
Grumman F-14 Tomcat
Hawker Siddeley Nimrod MR2/R1
Lockheed AC-130 Spectre
Lockheed C-5 Galaxy
Lockheed C-130 Hercules
Lockheed C-141 Starlifter
Lockheed EP-3E Aries II
Lockheed Martin F-16 Fighting Falcon
Lockheed KC-130 tanker
Lockheed HC-130P Combat Shadow
Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talon
Lockheed P-3C Orion
Lockheed S-3 Viking
Lockheed Tristar
Lockheed U-2 Dragon Lady
McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 Hornet
F-15E Strike Eagle
McDonnell Douglas KC-10 Extender
MiG-21
Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit
Northrop Grumman E-8 Joint STARS
Rockwell B-1B Lancer
Vickers VC-10

Helicopters

Bell AH-W Cobra

Bell UH-1N

Boeing AH-64 Apache

Boeing Chinook HC2

Boeing CH-47 Chinook

Boeing MH-47 Chinook

Mil Mi-8/17

Sikorsky CH-46E

Sikorsky CH-53E

Sikorsky MH-53 Pave Low

Sikorsky HH-60

Sikorsky MH-60 DAP

Westland Puma HC1

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

General Atomics M/RQ-1 Predator

Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk

Weapons

AGM-84 SLAM-ER

BLU-82

CBU-87

JDAM

Paveway Laser Guided Bomb

SA-2/3 SAM

Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM)

